Marion Zimmer Bradley's

Fantasy

Magazine
Spring 2000
Issue 47

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by Cherith Baldry

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by Patricia Duffy Novak

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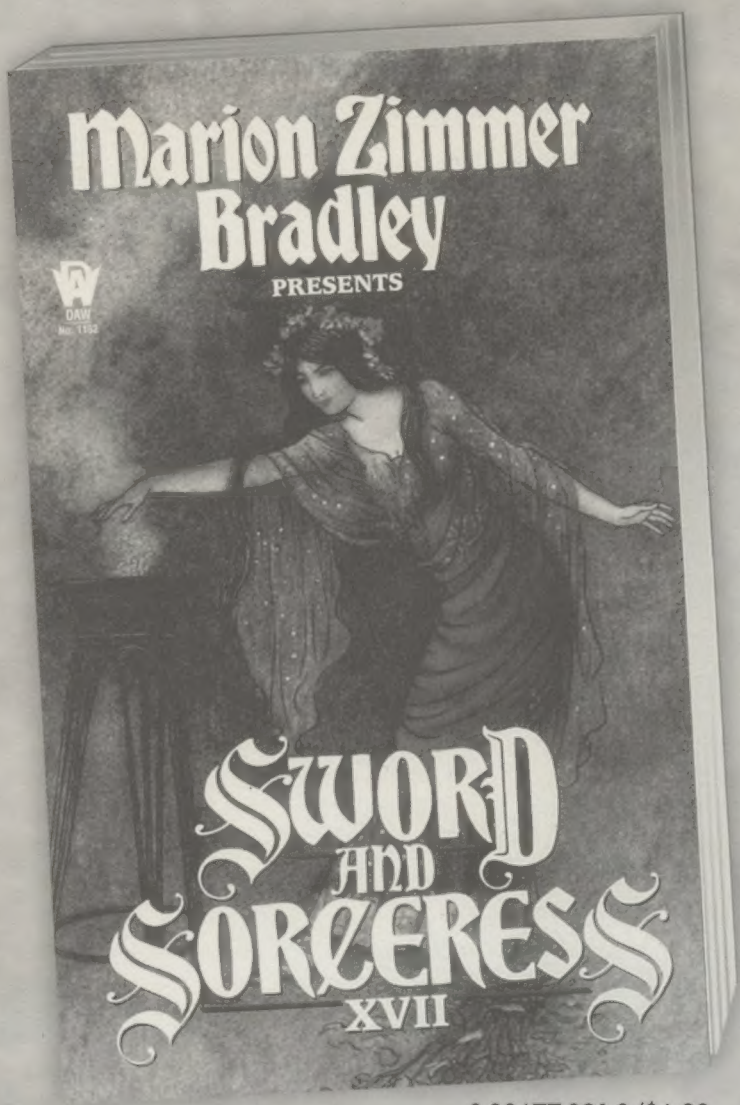

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Art and Economics

he cover layout's different this time, partly because that's how Lori Deitrick and I planned the artwork, and partly because we have decided to stop using a distributor — which means we no longer need to have a barcode messing up the view.

When we raised the cover price a year or two back, it was partly to cover the cost of distribution. But even with the price increase, we've been losing $2,000 or more per issue on the distributor account. Our printing cost per copy will increase, but at least the distributor won't be selling thousands of copies of each issue to a paper-recycling firm while at the same time not paying us for those same copies (since they didn't sell to bookstores). The sole purpose of the barcode was to enable the distributor to tell us, accurately, how many copies had failed to sell. (I exaggerate; surely the bar code was used for all sorts of routing and tracking purposes, but its use in tracking what are euphemistically called "returns" has always been, to me, its most galling feature.) Therefore I am glad to see it go.

The market is geared, whether we like it or not, to large-scale enterprises, and this magazine has never managed to break into even the modest numbers needed to make itself pay. Probably at the outset, the strategy later followed successfully by *Science Fiction Age* and *Realms of Fantasy* should have been employed: sell a lot of charter subscriptions until you reach a target number (20,000 or so) before you commence actual publication. Major advertisers such as the Science Fiction Book Club told me they wanted to see subscription numbers in that range before they considered it economical to buy ad space from us — and in magazine publishing, the rule of thumb is that your subscription income should cover office overhead and salaries, and the ad income should cover your printing bill. But even with several major mail-order campaigns, we've never been able to get the number of *MZBFM* subscriptions above 4,000. (And we are certainly very grateful to those who have advertised with us, especially DAW Books.)

Our future is in doubt. I feel confident, after years of working with Marion, to select stories that would continue the magazine's traditions, but advertising and subscription income do not begin to cover the magazine's actual costs to Marion's estate. However, for the moment, please enjoy the stories in this and future issues, most of them selected jointly by me and Mrs. Bradley. Her hope was that you would be entertained by them.

Rachel Holmen

All-Original
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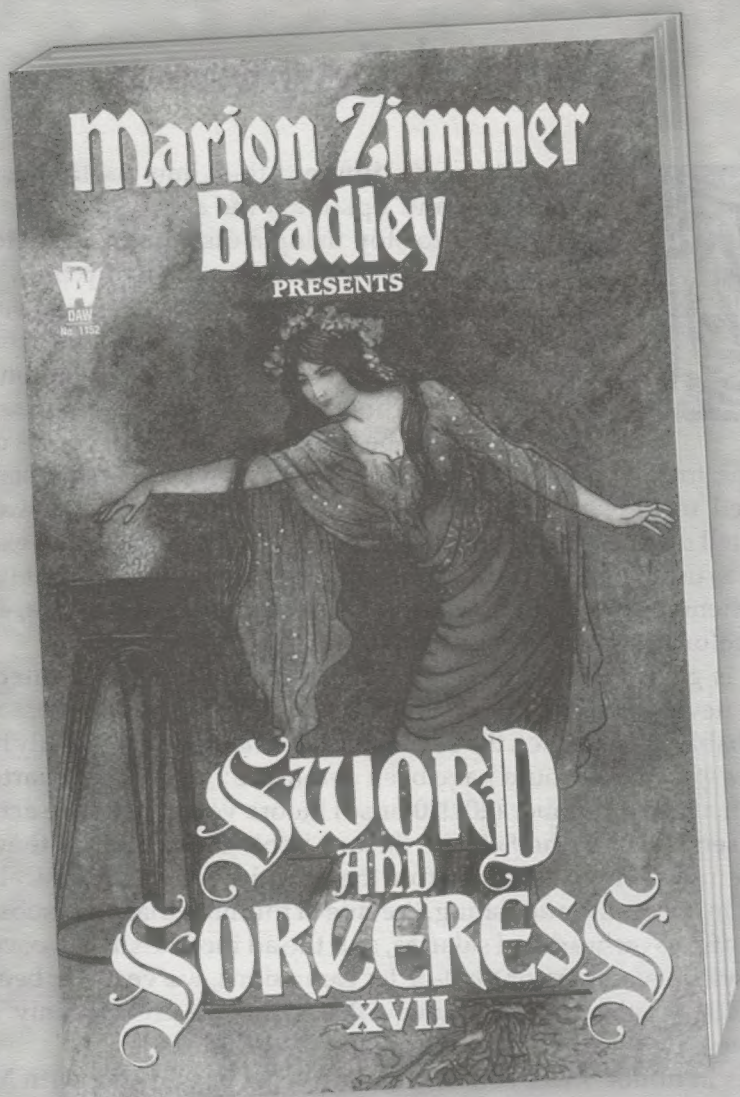

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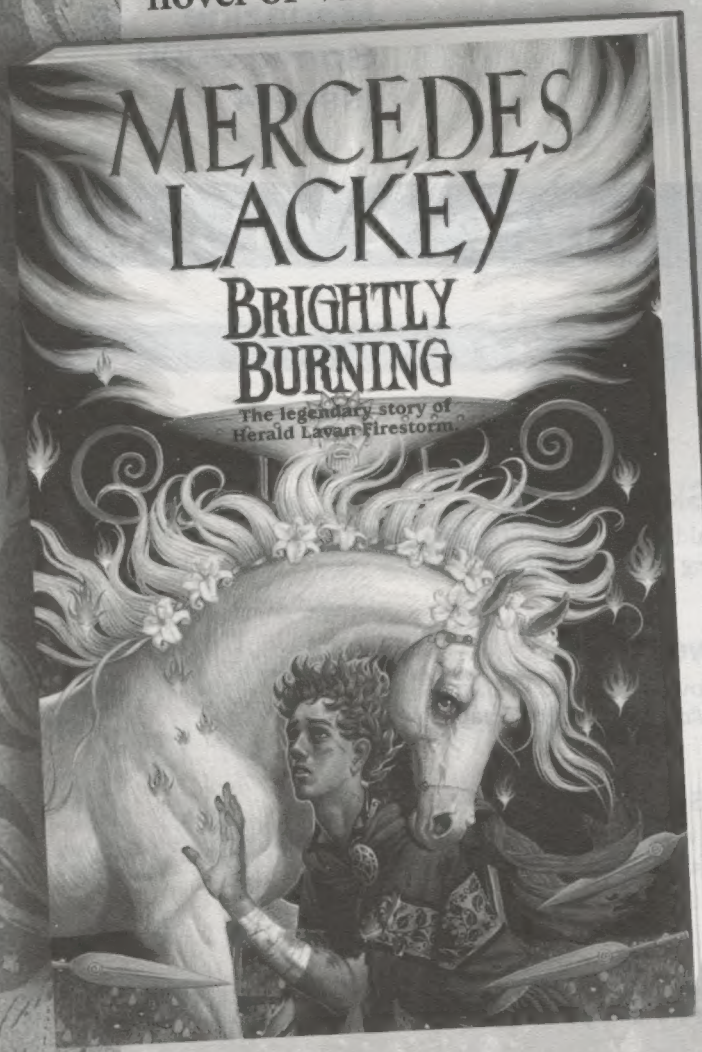

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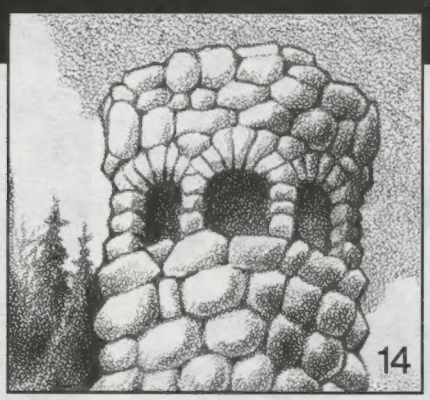
Contents



Fiction

Cover Story
Untune the Sky 6
by Cherith Baldry; art by Lori Deitrick
Peronel plays for King Tibor the Mad

Valemist Tower 14
by Patricia Novak; art by K. L. Darnell
Garrin rescues a fellow wizard held hostage

The Janitor's Closet 22
by Katherine Woodbury; art by Lynne Fahnestalk
You know that evil fax machine in the school office???

Cauliflower 32
by Annette Hall; art by Margaret Davis
Prince Colin pays for trampling the veggies

A Dear Gazelle 34
by Elizabeth Wein; art by Omar Rayyan
Jocelyn's receives two unusual birthday gifts

Faer Trading 48
by Lyn McConchie; art by Heather Hudson
Maybe there are compensations for raising a changeling...

Just Rule 52
by Peg Robinson; art by Nicholas Jainschigg
Will Tilda marry Gogri the troll or become Queen?

Interior illustration for "Faer Trading" by Heather Hudson

The Skin Trade 56
by Lynn Hebert; art by Jonathan & Lisa Hunt
Justice is not always vengeance

Regular Features

Letters 28

Results of the Cauldron 28

Interview with Michaela Roessner 40
by Rachel E. Holmen

The Last Word 62
by Rachel E. Holmen

Where to Buy MZBFM 62

The Cauldron: Vote for Your Favorites 64

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Editor & Publisher	Rachel E. Holmen
Layout	Margaret Davis
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	Debbie Notkin

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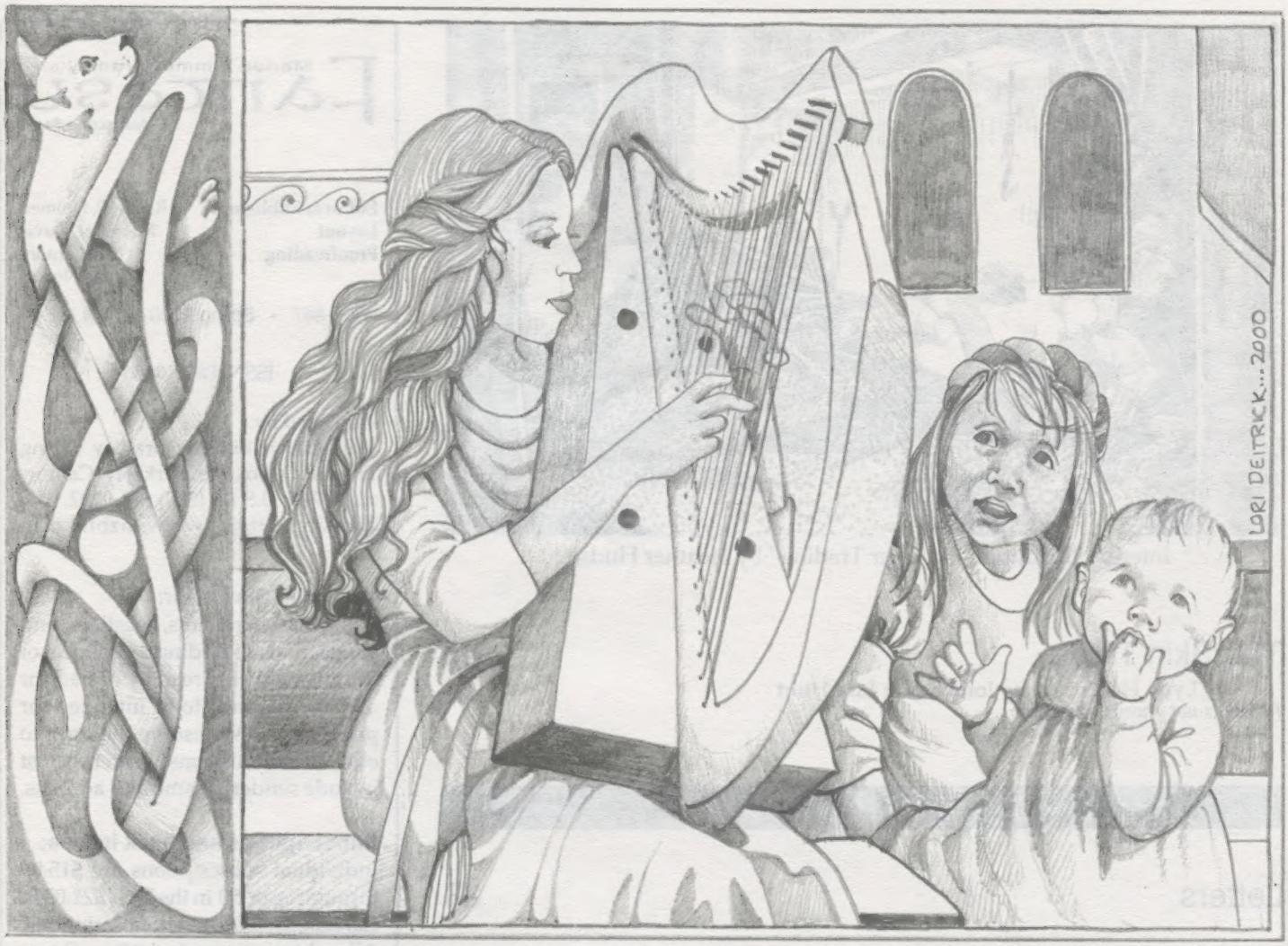


Artwork by Lori Deitrick

Untune The Sky

by Cherith Baldry

Peronel sat in the marketplace and played her harp. Children squabbled in the dust around her feet. One tiny mite, face sticky with gingerbread, sat and listened, round-eyed, mouth plugged by a dirty thumb. Peronel harped a kitten, leaping and skittering and pouncing after a ball. The filthy features creased into a delighted grin.

Silver clinked authoritatively in Peronel's harp case. She stared. A ten-solar piece. A hand shot out of the crowd and whisked the child away, protesting. Peronel looked up, tucking a strand of tawny hair behind her ear.

The man who stood before her was slender, his dark hair greying at the temples — greying prematurely, for he was not old. His eyes were dark in thin, severe features. He wore a grey robe of thick, ribbed silk, with a touch of silver embroidery at wrists and throat. Peronel thought she had never seen a man who looked so tired. "Sir?" she said.

"Of your courtesy, mistress..." He hesitated. The voice was quiet, unthreatening. "Of your courtesy, play something from the mountain country."

Peronel bent her head over her instrument again, stroking a hand down the silky wood to quieten its sudden quivering. She harped a green hillside, under a sky glimmering with the last light of evening. She harped a stream, tumbling and foaming, and the silver leap of a salmon. She harped soft rain, and a lighted window.

As the last notes died into silence, letting the market hubbub rise once more around her and her listener, she raised her head to see him standing quite still; the tracks of two tears shone on his face. He rubbed a hand across his eyes as if he was waking from sleep. "You are Kithar," he said.

Unselfconsciously he gathered the skirts of his robe and sat beside her on the step. "May I?" He stretched out a hand, slender and unadorned with rings, a hand with the scholar's callus between first and second fingers. At Peronel's nod of assent he laid it gently on the harp wood. A wondering smile touched his lips. "It's warm."

His eyes went to her face, and along with the wonder she saw a little fear.

"I'm no sorceress, my lord," she said.

"No — no, Kithar. I have read of

such, but never seen... It's true, then? You give life to your instrument, in return for your skill?"

"No, my lord." She let her voice sharpen, but not much. She would not disturb his breathless reverence. "My skill is my own — believe me, I worked for it. But yes, when I crafted the harp I shared life with it, feeling, understanding..." There were, in the end, no words for what the Kithar did when she made her harp.

He let his hand fall. "This is a great wonder," he said. "Mistress..." The hesitancy returned to his voice. "Mistress, I am Amory, Lord Seneschal. I would count it great honour if you would come to the court, and play for my lord the king."

Peronel cradled her harp, and considered. "For King Tibor? Tibor the Open-handed, I've heard him called." By harpers and players and jugglers, who might be accused of wishful thinking. "Or Tibor the Handsome." By girls young enough to be silly about his portrait on a coin. "But by all reports, my lord, he's going to go down in the chronicles as Tibor the Mad."

She was unprepared for the pain that flooded into Lord Amory's face. For a moment he was wide open to her, until he mastered himself and raised a mask of reserve. "He is not mad," he said.

"If not mad, then debauched. Any woman would be a fool who went into his court unprotected."

Lord Amory jerked his head up. "You are not unprotected," he said stiffly. "I give you my word for your safe-conduct." His hands convulsed, gripping hard on each other. "No, why should you trust me?" The words were sighed out. "I have no right to expect you to take the risk. Forgive me."

There was a catch in his voice, as if he forced back tears. Peronel studied him. He had the power to command her, or coerce her. Instead, he offered her his own distress, and a free choice.

The market swirled around them, buyers and sellers, with no more than perhaps a startled look now and then at the Lord Seneschal sitting on the tollbooth steps in earnest conversation with a harper. His face was hidden from her now, the dark head averted.

Peronel scooped up the coins at her feet, and began fitting her harp into its case. "Don't torment yourself, my lord," she said. "I'll come."

Lord Amory unlatched the wicket in the great gate of the citadel and held it open for Peronel to step through. She looked around her curiously. In front of her a vast paved courtyard stretched as far as grey walls, beginning to flush rose as the sun went down. She could see no one except for the gate guard.

"I will have you taken to a room, Mistress Peronel," Lord Amory said. "The king will send for you to play after supper. Would you like a change of clothes?"

He was detached, businesslike, with no sign of the emotion that had shaken him in the marketplace.

Peronal brushed ruefully at her dusty skirts. Her pack was still in the inn where she had slept the night before. "Perhaps it might be best, my lord. You will know —"

The clanging of the bell above the gate cut off her words. More guards clattered down the gatehouse stairs and began pulling open the main gates. From the street outside Peronel could hear the sound of hoofbeats.

Amory drew her to one side as the gates opened. A cavalcade thrust into the courtyard: bright cloaks and horse caparisons, the glitter of jewels, movement, noise, laughter. The leading horseman was a tall man with bright golden hair, no longer young, but still startlingly handsome in a florid way.

Peronel had seen the likeness of that face a thousand times on coins and in the picture-makers' shops: King Tibor. At his shoulder rode an even bigger man, broader and more muscular, with black hair and beard. As they rode through the gates the king turned in the saddle, said something inaudible to his companion, and the man threw back his head, roaring with laughter.

The rest of the horsemen streamed into the courtyard behind them. Peronel hoped she might go unnoticed, but the king wheeled his horse round in a wide arc and brought it to a halt in front of her. His dark companion followed.

"What have you got there, Amory?" King Tibor asked. His voice was high-pitched, petulant. "Something amusing? I'm bored, Amory."

Lord Amory bowed. "I regret that, my lord," he said dryly. "But perhaps I can cure you. Mistress Peronel is a harper."

The king dismounted and tossed his reins to a waiting groom. A couple of strides brought him close to Peronel; he cupped her chin in one gloved hand and jerked her head up.

"No beauty," he said. "It's to be hoped she plays well. She's good for nothing else."

Peronel stiffened, not at the insult, but the threat behind it. The dark-bearded man swung down from his horse, put a hand on the king's shoulder and murmured something into his ear. Tibor let out a snigger. "What, Rolf?"

"Bring her before you," Rolf said. "Tonight, after supper. But not to play. Make her smash her harp, and burn it." King Tibor moistened his lips, staring at Rolf. Rolf's voice dropped to a deep, throbbing note. "Cut off her fingers. Tear out her tongue."

"My lord!" Amory's words were half stifled with outrage. He had turned white. "My lord, the woman is under my protection. I gave her my word."

Rolf guffawed. "Have you found yourself a wench at last, Amory? Is there something more than ink in your veins? Don't worry, you can have her — when the king has finished." He snapped his fingers at the guards. "Take her and keep her prisoned."

An icy sweat broke out over Peronel's body. The harp pulsed rhythms of terror; her own blood answered. She kept silence; what use to plead? Two guards came to flank her as Rolf and the king left, Tibor clinging to Rolf in fits of half-hysterical laughter.

"Not mad?" Peronel said coldly.

Amory shook his head. "Not mad. Lost, degraded... oh, dear God, help him..." For an instant she thought he would break down into weeping, but instead he drew himself up in frozen calm. To the guards he said, "Obey your lord."

He turned his back on her, and followed the king and Rolf. Peronel stopped herself from crying out. She had trusted him; she still thought him honest. He had done his best for her, but it was not enough.

Instead she looked her guards up and down. "Well? Are we going to stand here all night?"

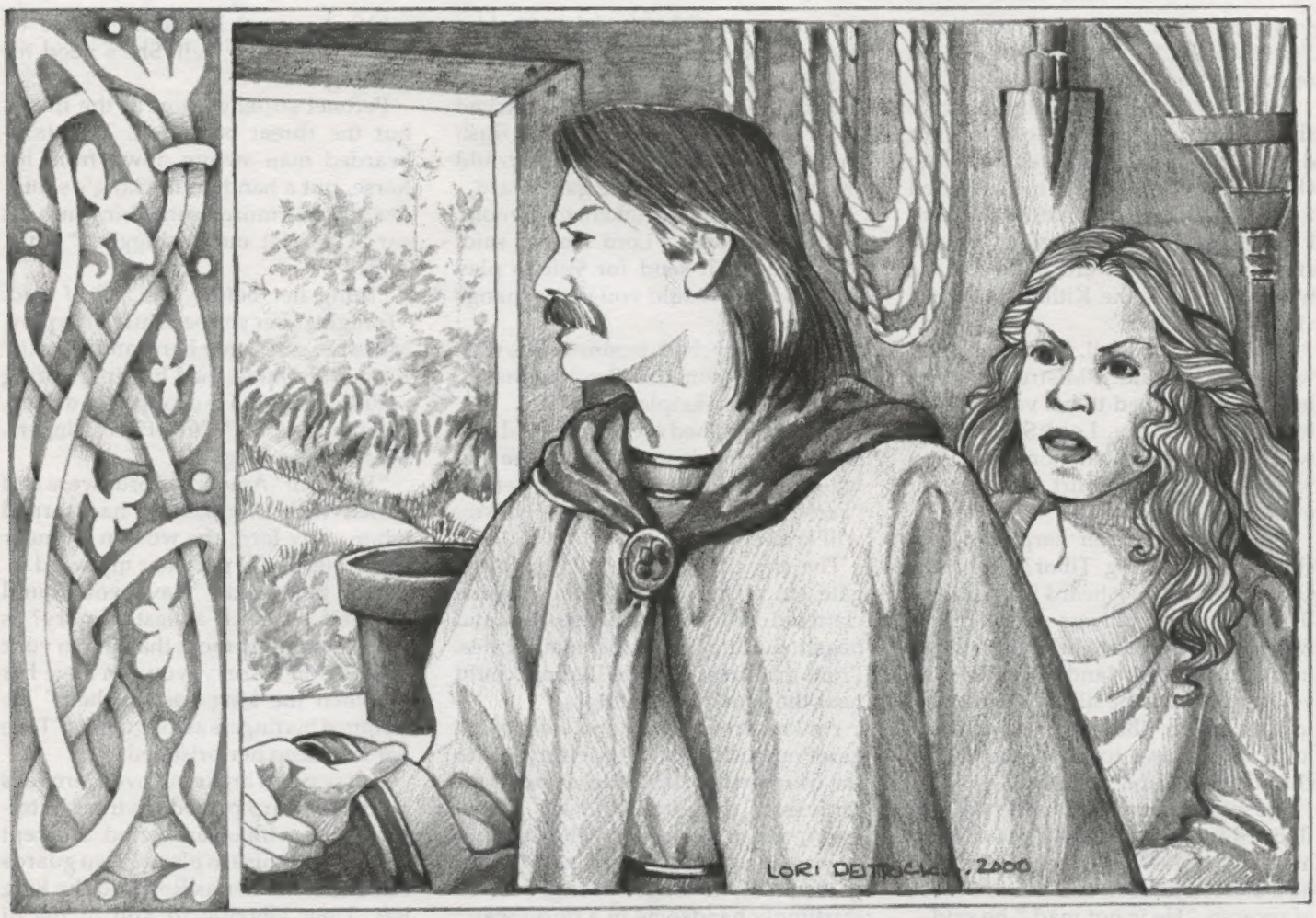
Shamefaced, not able to meet her eyes, the guards took her into the citadel by another entrance, down steps, and into a cell.

"Mistress, we're sorry..." one of them stammered out.

"No blame to you," Peronel said.

"Do you want a message sent?"

She shook her head, almost smiling. The guard who spoke was young, no older than the brother she had left be-



hind at home. The frozen expression of fear on the face of the other told her what he was risking. She made her smile real; the boy flushed, and closed the door on her.

The cell was bare, except for a stone seat built into the wall under the window. Peronel sat there, hugging her harp, feeling its tremors even through the thick canvas case. The dying sun painted bars of blood on the flagstones. Gradually they faded, until the only light came from the passage, through a narrow slit above the door.

Peronel was not despairing. If Lord Amory had not told the king that she was Kithar, then there was hope, provided they would let her play. But her heart still leapt into her throat as she heard the key in the cell door.

Lamplight washed into the tiny room. It showed her not the guard she had expected, but Lord Amory. He beckoned to her. "Quickly," he said.

Peronel followed him out into the passage; no one was there. "Where's the guard?" she asked.

"Bribed."

Lord Amory took her by the wrist and led her swiftly along the passage and up a twisting stair. There was no sound but their own footsteps. Peronel followed Amory through a maze of passages until he pulled her through another door and closed it behind them.

Peronel looked round. This was a gardener's store, stacked with tools, looking out over a garden. Lord Amory fetched a stool, flicked his handkerchief over it and gestured to her to sit.

"We must wait for a guard to pass," he said. "Then go to the Street of Linenweavers, and ask for Master Martin. He will see you safely out of the city."

He stationed himself at the window, a shadow in his grey robe.

"My lord," Peronel said, "why are you doing this?"

He glanced over his shoulder; his face was flint hard. "I gave you my word," he said. "Do they think that is nothing? Do they think because I wield a pen instead of a sword I have no honour?"

She realised that he was blindly angry. "Will the king not punish you?" she asked.

Amory's anger seemed to ebb. He shuddered and passed a hand over his face. "He will either forgive me or execute me. If he doesn't do the first, I — I care very little about the second."

He returned his gaze to the garden outside, Peronel suspected to hide his face from her. After a moment he went on, his voice a low murmur, "I am not...very much afraid. The king and I were fostered together, and —"

"In the mountain country?"

She heard Amory's indrawn breath. "Yes. In the north, well away from his father's wars. I am...a habit of his. One he finds hard to break."

"And is he your habit?"

Peronel saw him flinch, but he did not look at her. "Why do you stay?" she said.

Amory spread his hands, a beautiful, unconscious gesture. "Where would I go? I have no lands, nothing but what he has given me. Even the clothes I wear..." He fingered the stiff silk. "My skills, though useful, are limited. I'm not even a competent swordsman. There are few places where...where a man such as I..."

Artwork by Lori Deitrick

His voice caught; he ran out of words and stammered into silence.

"And you love him," Peronel said. Amory did not try to deny it. "And Tibor?"

"He loves his lands." Amory's voice was so revealing that if he had stripped his body naked in front of her it would have meant nothing. "And he loves...being king. He does not..."

This time his falling silent was deliberate; he shook his head, as if he had almost let himself slip into disloyalty. What was it in him, Peronel wondered, that could love and serve a king who would enjoy torture?

Gently she said, "What has gone wrong? What is it that has broken between you?"

Lord Amory's head jerked round at that. Peronel knew he was afraid, and yet there was something in that grey room, in their murmured conversation, that was drawing the heart out of him.

After a moment he said, "You know Amvor, mistress?"

"I've been there."

Amvor was a large, restless kingdom that lay to the south and east. A boorish people, in Peronel's view, with no feeling for music. She had cut short her one visit there.

"The king of Amvor casts his eyes on us," Lord Amory said. "But we have a treaty that his father made with Tibor's, and he would not be called oathbreaker. Yet if our king should commit such atrocities that his own people rose against him — then the king of Amvor might feel it his sacred duty to come to their aid." He gave a wintry smile. "When the dust had settled, we might find ourselves a tributary province of Amvor."

Peronel considered that. "Then someone, some servant of Amvor, can influence King Tibor. A clever advisor, or — enchantment?"

Amory shook his head impatiently. "All I know is that since last summer the king is changed. His decrees grow cruel. He has raised taxes. He demands forced labour, and sends men far from their wives and families. He —"

"Orders the tongues torn out of musicians," Peronel said.

Amory winced. "I have tried to soften his commands." The faint smile reappeared. "Creative incompetence can be very useful. I can delay the end of his journey, but I have not the power or influence to change it. He rides to his own destruction."

"And who points the way?" Peronel asked, though she already knew the answer.

"You saw Lord Rolf. His father was the king's chief councillor, a man incorruptible, through and through. Last spring he died, and his son succeeded him. He has Tibor's favour." Amory's tones grew bitter. "He is a man such as men admire. He rides hard, drinks harder, quarrels at a word, jests in season. He has an eye for a pretty girl —" He brought the catalogue to an end with a sigh.

"You would not wish yourself like that?" Peronel asked.

Lord Amory shrugged awkwardly. "I would not, but... My world is inventories, account books. They pay lip service, call me useful, but they despise me in their hearts." His hands clenched and relaxed. "Perhaps it is not so little, to be useful."

"And you suspect Lord Rolf of treason?" Peronel said.

"I have no cause but my own...dislike. But there is something about him that rings false." His lips twisted. "I should not dare to say even so much, to his face. He has the king's favour, and a ready sword, and I am not a brave man."

"And the music?" Peronel asked.

"The music..." Amory spread his hands in that beautiful gesture again, as if he gathered in herself and her harp. "Music is order, grace, precision. It is the voice of courage ringing out in the dark. And the music of the Kithars is all that and more. When I heard you

Artwork by Lori Deitrick

in the marketplace I thought you might drive out Tibor's malady. I'm sorry. I did not think he had fallen so far."

Peronel smiled. "I understand now," she said. "You're not risking your life for me, are you? You're doing it for him. For the king."

Before Amory could reply they heard the sound of slow footsteps in the garden outside. Amory drew back from the window. A shape blocked out the light as a guard paced along the path outside.

As soon as silence flowed back, Amory was at the door. "Now — quickly."

He thrust Peronel out into the garden. They hurried down a winding path through clumps of flowers; tiny florets clung to Peronel's skirts. It was dark under the trees, but soon Peronel could make out, gathering ahead of her, the deeper darkness of a wall. Somewhere in the distance she heard the tumbling of a fountain.

Amory fumbled a key out of the pocket of his robe. "Where are you to go?" he asked.

"To Master Martin, in the Street of Linenweavers."

Amory gave a faint murmur of satisfaction. They drew closer to the wall. Peronel could distinguish the outline of a gate. On either side the shadows lay deep. Something prickled on the back of her neck. She checked, reaching out to Amory.

At the same moment, a clink of metal came out of the blackness, and the scrape of a sword leaving its sheath. From the shadows, Lord Rolf stepped forward, more dark shapes at his back. "You fool, Amory," he said pleasantly. "Did you really think you could outmanoeuver me?"

Lord Rolf led them back across the gardens and into another part of the citadel where the corridors were brightly lit with torches, the walls hung with tapestries or displays of shields and weapons. At last they came to King Tibor's presence chamber.

On the dais, beneath a silken canopy, the king was sprawling in a cushioned chair. His face was flushed, and he had a cup of wine in his hand. Another chair at his side was empty. Around the walls of the room his courtiers were seated, looking to Peronel's dazzled eyes like an overblown bank of flowers. Murmuring broke out as she and Amory were thrust inside, and someone laughed, half hysterically.

Lord Rolf approached the steps of the dais and bowed. "The harper woman, my lord. Lord Amory brought her to the postern gate in the gardens. As I told you."

King Tibor leant forward and focused, with some difficulty, on his seneschal. "Amory..." he said, his voice thick with the drink. "Why — why betray me?"

"I have never betrayed you, my lord." Amory was standing straight, his shoulders rigid. In his grey robe he looked like a ghost in that bright company. "I have never lied to you. And I tell you now that if you do this evil thing the very stones of the city will cry out against you."

Tibor regarded him drunkenly. Peronel watched. She was recovering her self-possession, and she was wondering whether Lord Amory told the truth. Perhaps the stones of the city would protest; the courtiers surrounding the king looked far too terrified to do it themselves.

"My lord, he threatens you," Lord Rolf said. "He speaks treason."

He aimed a venomous look at Peronel. She met it steadily. His eyes were black; it was like gazing into a pit. Peronel wondered what he was. A simple traitor, bought and paid for by the king of Amvor? Or did the bold exterior mask something darker? Even through the case, she felt a shiver pass through her harp.

King Tibor shook his head as if to clear it. He was still staring at Amory.

"My lord, I thought only to please you," Lord Amory said. "Mistress Peronel is a fine musician. Will you not hear her?"

Peronel caught her breath. She should have known that Amory would not tell the king she was any more than a simple harper. If only she could play, she might yet weave with her music a net to entrap their enemy.

She sank in a low curtsey. "My lord,

Artwork by Lori Deitrick

if I do not please you, then do with me as you will."

King Tibor barked out a laugh. "You're no coward, harper woman," he said. "I like that. Very well, then — play."

While a servant brought a stool for Peronel, Lord Rolf, in a sudden black temper, took the seat beside the king on the dais. Lord Amory seated himself in a vacant chair at the foot of the steps. He was still tense, but Peronel could sense a relaxation among the courtiers as Tibor called for more wine.

The king was smiling, but Peronel did not know if the smile was for her, or for the thoughts of what he meant to do to her. Drunken men are unpredictable, and there was still Lord Rolf. Men like Lord Rolf — even if he was no more than what he seemed — offended Peronel. She drew her harp from its case. Let Lord Rolf enjoy this music if he could.

She harped webs of night. She harped the soft footstep on the stair in darkness, the fall into black water, the hours before dawn when sleep will not come. She harped despair.

Almost as soon as the music began, Lord Amory bowed his head, and rested it on one hand, hiding his face. Peronel suspected he was weeping. She kept on, but she felt a tightness around her heart. He understood why he had to bear it, and yet understanding was not the same as escape; he had to go on bearing it.

The king looked disturbed, but no more. He was shifting in his chair, glancing from face to face, as if he could not divine what was wrong, and wanted someone to tell him. Peronel's biggest fear was that he would order her to stop, before her music had the chance to work.

Then she her eyes turned to Lord Rolf. Instead of terror and despair, she saw exultation in his face. She saw his ecstasy in the darkness she had threaded through him, and she understood the dark thing he was.

He leant towards the king's chair and spoke into his ear. "Treason, my lord. Plain treason as I told you. She is Kithar. She takes men's minds, and twists, and breaks them. She will break yours. And who brought her here, the witch and her harp?"

He pointed at Lord Amory. The seneschal was still seated, clinging to the arms of his chair as if the torrent of music could sweep him away and drown him. Now he rose, took a step forward, and sank to his knees. He was weeping.

"My lord," he said, "I have loved you all my life. If you truly believe I would betray you, then let me die now."

Lord Rolf leant forward, grasped Tibor's arm and hissed out something that Peronel could not hear. There was a light of triumph in his eyes. Growing uncertain, Peronel let the music die, until there was nothing to be heard in the chamber, beyond the appalled silence of the courtiers, but Amory's racking sobs.

Peronel understood. Her music had spoken to Rolf of darkness, but he knew darkness as the fish knows the sea. She did not question what he was: armed against her by an ancient evil. It was Amory who was vulnerable, Amory whom she had driven over the edge of endurance.

"Forgive me," she murmured, and did not know whether she spoke to Amory or to the harp. This was not what she thought it meant to be Kithar.

The harp thrummed impatiently. Peronel laid a hand against the strings to silence them, and felt the harp's protest like a lightning bolt. And like the lightning, it showed her what she had not seen before. She drew her fingers across the strings, sending a flight of notes flashing into the room like birds, and began again.

She harped sunlight dazzling on water, and the salmon's leap. She harped a familiar footfall outside the door. She harped weariness at the end of a long day, and quiet voices round the fireside. She harped the wind of morning as dawn breaks over mountain pastures starred with dew. She harped love.

Now she kept her eyes lowered, fixed on the strings and the curve of the harp frame and her own hands. She had risked everything, on the belief that if a man like Amory could give his love to Tibor, then there must be something within the king where that love could

Artwork by Lori Deitrick

rest, something that was, still, worthy of it.

As her harp sang joyously, Peronel heard beyond its music a choking protest from Lord Rolf, and the crash of Tibor's chair as the king lurched to his feet. "Amory," he said. "Amory, don't."

Now Peronel risked a glance. Ignoring Lord Rolf, the king stumbled down the steps of the dais, and fell to his knees beside Amory, who still crouched, sobbing, unaware of him until Tibor folded him in a clumsy embrace. Amory shuddered, and clung to him. Peronel harped her own exultation, and their peace.

From the crowd of courtiers, someone screamed. A man was on his feet, pointing at the dais. A growing tumult threatened to drown the music, but Peronel made the sound of her harping swell until it rode the clamour as a ship rides the waves.

On the dais the body of Lord Rolf had burst open. Skin and flesh and sinew were shrivelling away, leaving something black and skeletal, with eyes that burnt madness. Sticklike limbs jerked to the intolerable rhythms of love. It scrabbled towards the edge of the dais, towards the king and Amory, but the convulsive spasms grew rapidly weaker, and it collapsed at the edge of the step, still twitching feebly.

Peronel did not think that the king and Amory were aware of it. Tibor was helping Amory to his feet, still keeping an arm round him for support.

"Amory, you fool," he said, his voice rough but gentle. "Do you think I could harm you? When the whole court would fall to pieces without you?"

Lord Amory was struggling for self-control, but the terror and stress of the music had been too much for him. He leant against the king; if he said anything Peronel could not hear it above the music.

"You need to rest," Tibor said. "You're making yourself ill. Come."

He mounted the dais and paused briefly before the thing that lay dying there. A vague, troubled look crossed his face, as if he was trying to remember something. "Enchantment...?" he murmured.

"My lord, it's over," said Amory.

Tibor frowned, and shook his head as if to clear it, as he led Amory to his own chair. He barked a dismissal to his courtiers, who flowed eagerly through the doors.

"Not you, harper woman," Tibor added. "Come here."

Folding her lips on a smile, Peronel drew the music to a close in a bright flourish of notes, and obeyed.

As she mounted the dais she cast a glance at the thing that was surely not Lord Rolf, son of the king's most trusted councillor. Whether the demon had replaced him or possessed him, she did not know, or greatly care. It was already withering to dust, and if the lords of Amvor had relied upon it to deliver Tibor into their hands, they would soon discover that it had failed.

King Tibor had poured wine, and was folding Amory's hands around the cup.

"Really, my lord, there's no need —" Amory protested weakly.

"Do as you're told," the king said. "Rest. Forget this nonsense." Remembering Peronel, he snapped his fingers at her. "What's your name, harper woman?"

Peronel dropped a curtsey. "Peronel, my lord."

"You're a brave woman. Skilled. More than skilled, maybe." He looked at her with narrowed eyes; under the bluff manner he was not without shrewdness. "You'll stay here, mistress," he said. "Be my court musician. That should please Amory, hey?"

He had a hand on Amory's shoulder; he tugged at it as he spoke. Amory, still shaken, said, "Mistress Peronel may have other plans, my lord."

"Rubbish! Any harper would jump at the chance. A king's favour? All the pretty clothes and jewels she could want?" Without giving Peronel a chance to reply, he swept on, "Play for Amory, mistress. I have things to attend to."

He strode out of the room.

"I'm sorry," Amory said. "When he has had time to calm down, I'll tell him..."

"No," Peronel said. She had not been conscious of making a decision. "I'll stay. For a while, at least." She looked away to avoid seeing the light in Amory's face. Her mouth quirking, she said, "How could I refuse all those pretty clothes and jewels?"

Amory dissolved into weak laughter. Peronel had not thought of him as a man who laughed much, and even now the sound had an edge of hysteria to it.

"Be quiet," she said. "Do as the king tells you. Rest."

She fetched her stool and set it so that Amory could not see the ashes and calcined bone that had been Lord Rolf. She took her tuning key, and tested the strings.

Sighing, Amory leant back in the chair, his eyes still intent on her. He was exhausted, but relaxed, as though he was free of a great burden.

He knew all of love, and faith, and endurance. It would be her task, Peronel thought, to teach him joy.

She harped fire, and lamplight, and the laughter of children.

❄

Cherith Baldry was born in Lancaster, England, and studied English at Manchester and Oxford. She taught for a number of years in various places including the University of Sierra Leone in West Africa. She is now a full-time writer and has published children's books, short fiction for adults and children, and plays. She has a special love of Arthurian legend. As well as writing, she is interested in early music and American quilts. She is married, with two sons and a cat.

Lori Deitrick has been published in *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, *Amazing Stories*, and often for *Marion Zimmer Bradley's FANTASY Magazine*. Her fantasy originals have won numerous awards and grace the walls in the homes of many collectors. She is also known for her sensitive portraiture and wildlife work.

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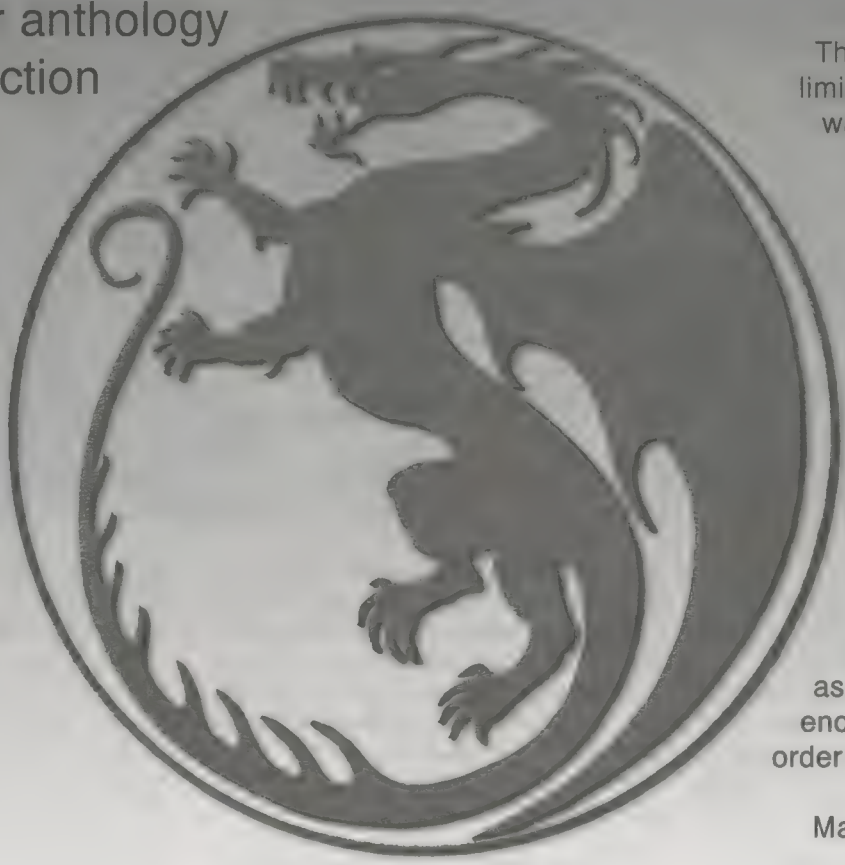

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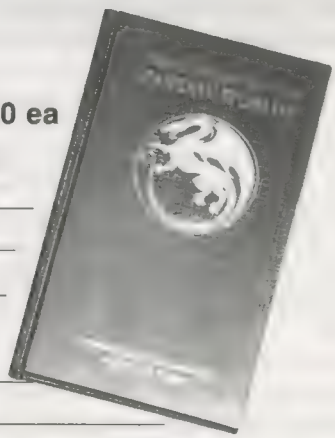

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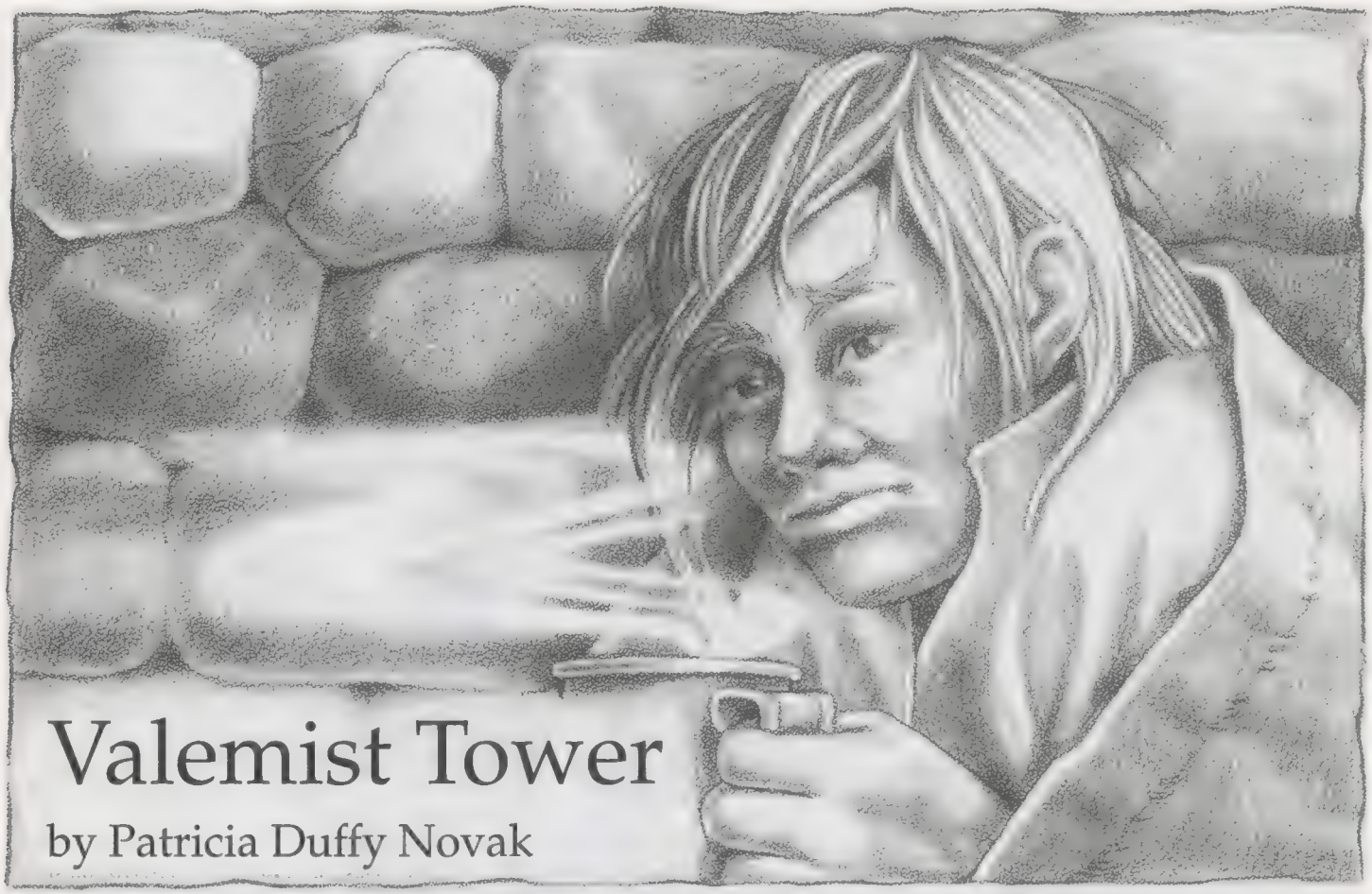

Valemist Tower

by Patricia Duffy Novak

The door of Garrin's cabin banged open, letting in a gust of damp autumn air. Startled, Garrin swung around from his desk, splashing hot tea on his hands. He cursed, then set his mug down, waving his hands to cool them. Mac Tom, one of Garrin's men, stood in the doorway, shuffling from foot to foot and eyeing Garrin warily. The scout stood a little over five feet tall — no higher than Garrin's heart.

"Come in, Mac, and shut the Gods-blast-it door. I wasn't cursing at you. I spilled my tea." Garrin's voice sounded creaky and strained to his own ears, and at least half an octave too high. He wore loose breeches and an old flannel shirt, with a blanket draped across his lap. His long hair lay tangled about his shoulders, and his chin sported half a day's growth of beard. He guessed he did not make an inspiring sight, a suspicion born out by Mac Tom's dubious gaze.

"Ah. Yes, sir." The scout did as Garrin told him, but kept near the door, as if keeping an escape route handy. Over the months since his appointment as captain of this scout unit, Garrin had slowly gained the respect of his men, but he didn't think they entirely trusted him. Garrin's reputation as a rogue wizard — a murderer, thief, and liar — had gone before him. Untrue all of it, and no formal charges had ever been brought; still Garrin doubted he would ever win free of that taint. Garrin could play the harp and he had a good singing voice. Occasionally, the men invited him to join them at their revels, but most of the time, when not on duty, they left him alone.

Garrin ducked his head to sneeze, then pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose. He slanted a glance at the scout, who had resumed shuffling his feet, both hands jammed into pockets. "I assume you want to tell me something, Mac? You wouldn't be here otherwise?"

"No, sir. I mean, yes, sir, I do have something to tell you, sir." The scout flushed. "But I didn't know you were as sick as all this. I mean, I knew you were sick, sir. Marcus told me you had a cold. But he didn't say you were so very sick, sir."

Garrin felt his patience tear. And yet he forced his voice to remain level, not wanting to make Mac Tom any more nervous. "The cold won't kill me. Give your report."

"Uh. Yes, sir." Mac Tom took a long breath. "There is a situation in Valemist Castle. A servant from the castle has come to beg your help."

Garrin frowned. About a mile to the west of the army camp, the Wizards of the Four Ways maintained a border outpost. Normally, he would expect any request from Valemist to go directly to the wizards, not to him. "What happened?"

"A wild talent showed itself in a kitchen girl, name of Tira."

Wild talent. Garrin felt his heartbeat quicken. Most wizards came into their gifts slowly during adolescence, their power growing with their skills. A wild talent developed full power all at once, without the skills to control it. His own talent had come upon him that way.

A spasm of coughing shook Garrin's chest. He choked and cursed, then sipped his tea, easing the maddening tickle. Mac Tom's face retained its tension; Garrin guessed the young scout had not finished his tale. "Is there more to this story?"

Mac Tom nodded. "The girl killed

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the cook this morning. Blew out a wall and buried the cook in the rubble."

"Oh, Gods." Garrin put his head in his hands, feeling the beginning of a thundering ache along his sinuses.

"There's something else, too." Mac Tom's voice held a chill edge. Garrin looked up. "The Lady Ressa Fervini was in that castle, visiting Lord Vale."

Ressa. Garrin groaned. Ressa Fervini, an Adept of the Red Path, commanded the wizards' outpost. Had Garrin's life gone differently, he might have had her post. But the wizards of Alworyn believed him a traitor to their order. He'd found refuge in the army, the only full wizard in its ranks. At Camp Martin, he did the same work as the wizard border guards, but for a fraction of their pay. It was not the lower salary that rankled.

In his interactions with her, Ressa had made it clear that she viewed Garrin Windson as a bigger threat to the nation's peace than any raiding barbarian warlords from the north. At Mac Tom's news, Garrin felt a mix of emotions he didn't care to examine closely. "Is she dead?"

Mac Tom shook his head. "The servant who came to us said that the kitchen girl has her hostage in the castle tower, along with some members of the Vale family."

Garrin sat up straighter. To kill with a raw blast of energy was one thing; to capture a well-trained Adept something else again. What kind of power did this kitchen girl wield? "Do the other wizards at the outpost know all this?"

"They know. They say none of them has the strength to fight this girl, that only you can do it. But not today you can't, sir. I'll them you're too sick to go."

Garrin let out a sigh. He was an Adept wizard, the same rank as Ressa, but every wizard in Alworyn knew that he commanded more power than even the strongest Master of the Ways. He should be able to stop that girl, even where Ressa had failed. But did he want to rescue Ressa? His illness could provide an excuse, but he knew his duty. He had taken an oath to Fram, God of the Heavens, to protect all the citizens of Alworyn from magical threats. No matter what people thought of him, he remained true to his word.

"Saddle my horse, Mac," Garrin said. "And your own. We'll ride to Valemist."

Mac Tom gaped. "But, sir, you —"

"That's an order, Mac." Garrin rose, clutching the blanket like a cape. A spasm of coughing forced him back down. But when it passed, he rose again. "Go," he said to Mac Tom. "I'll meet you at the stables."

"Yes, sir." The look the scout shot Garrin expressed Mac Tom's opinion of Garrin's decision. But Garrin knew Mac Tom was too good a soldier to disobey a direct command.

Jars of herbs lined a shelf above the table in the healer's cabin. From previous experience, Garrin knew that the mingled odors of the herbs gave the room a distinct and not entirely pleasant odor, but he could smell nothing today, one small blessing from his cold. He'd dressed himself in clean clothing, shaved, and tied back his hair, hoping to make himself look better than he felt. But when he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror on Marcus's wall, two red watery eyes glared back at him from either side of a swollen nose.

From under white, bushy eyebrows, Marcus, the healer, held Garrin's gaze. "You need to rest," he said. "Not go gallivanting about the countryside. You know what will happen if I grant your request. You'll feel good for maybe three hours, then you'll collapse with a double dose of what you already have. You'll be lucky if you don't get pneumonia."

Garrin waved aside Marcus's warning. "Three hours, you say?"

"About that," Marcus conceded gruffly.

Mentally, Garrin calculated the time Marcus's spell would buy him. It was a two-hour ride to Valemist. That left an hour to deal with the wild talent, which should be plenty of time, Garrin thought, the Gods willing. "I know the price I'll pay," Garrin said. "But I must go to Valemist. Several lives could be lost if I don't."

The healer's frown deepened. "You gamble with your own life in the hope of saving others?"

"There isn't enough time for me to argue with you." Garrin extended his hand. "Do it. That's an order."

Marcus grumbled something under his breath, but he took Garrin's hand in his own. A warmth spread along the palm, then up Garrin's arm, finally encompassing his whole body. When Marcus let go, Garrin found he could breathe easily, and the irritation in his throat was gone. The reek of herbs hit him like a blow. "Thank you," Garrin said.

"You'll pay for this later," Marcus grumbled. "Then you won't be thanking me."

Garrin ignored the last remark. Bowing slightly, he let himself out of the healer's cabin. Taking good, long breaths of clean air, he strode to the stable to find Mac Tom.

Valemist lay south and east of Camp Martin, along a path that Garrin had traveled frequently. The way led through thick woods, skirting the edges of rushing streams. A fog had risen along the trail, making the pace slow. Few creatures stirred in the forest, leaving only the clopping of the horses' hooves to break the silence.

As Garrin and Mac Tom neared Valemist, the forest path widened and the fog lifted. In the distance, Garrin spied, among the boles of the bare trees, a tower of gray stone.

When they drew up to the castle yard, Garrin dismounted and motioned for Mac Tom to do the same. Silently, the young scout staked the horses, while Garrin studied the castle. The single tower rose prominently to the east side, cut from rough stone.

Garrin crouched in the leaves and glanced at his pocket watch. Thanks to the fog, two and a half hours had passed on route, leaving him little time. Was the kitchen girl still in the tower? Garrin narrowed his eyes, engaging mage sight, but the stone blocked his efforts.

Mac Tom was not a wizard, but like many of the men in Garrin's company, he had a touch of the mage gift. The young man could sense the use of magic near him. Garrin turned to him. "What are you picking up, Mac?"

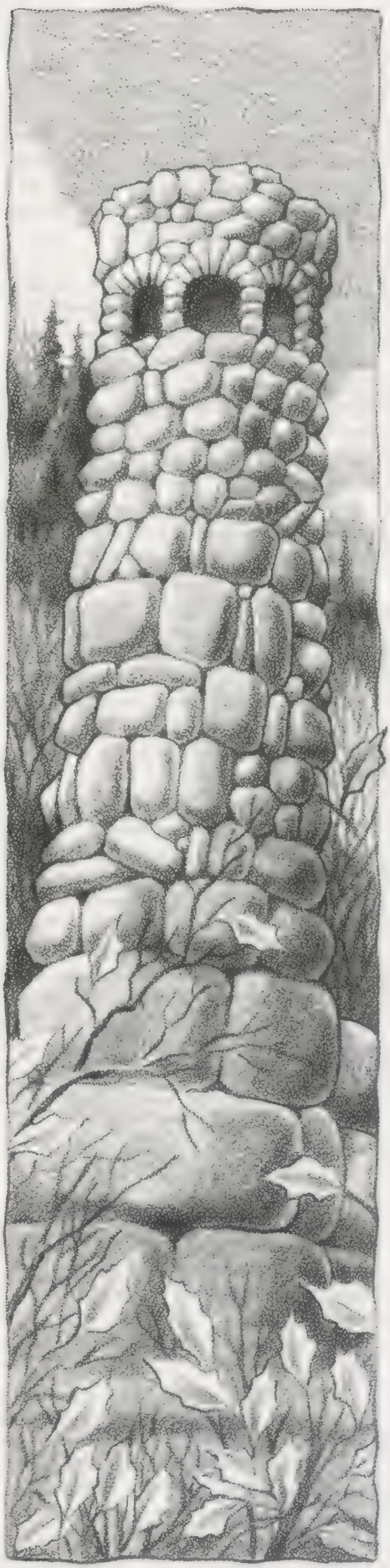
Mac Tom's nose quivered slightly. He pointed to the tower. "She's up there. There's a raw taint to the magic. And Ressa is there, too, although her scent is almost overpowered."

Garrin grunted. "Thanks, Mac. Wait here. If I'm not back by sundown, return to the wizards' outpost and tell them I failed."

Mac Tom shook his head. "You won't fail."

Garrin shrugged. Then he drew power, just a small amount, enough to bend the light into a shield of invisibility. Behind him, he heard Mac Tom gasp softly, then nothing, as the scout settled to wait.

Garrin walked across the yard to the



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base of the tower. Weathered stones formed easy hand- and footholds, and large windows ringed the turret. An easy climb. In a few minutes, he neared the windows and paused to listen. From inside, he heard the sound of someone's soft weeping.

The invisibility spell hid him from sight, and he hoped the weeping covered any noise he'd made. With care to remain as silent as possible, he slithered onto the window ledge and balanced himself there.

The tower room was large and sparsely furnished. A hint of mold carried to him. A long abandoned room, probably. In one corner, he spied the bright blue of a woman's gown, and then he made out the rest of the lady. She knelt with her face in her hands. Behind her, dressed in darker colors, stood a man of early middle years, with his hand on her shoulder. Lord and Lady Vale, Garrin guessed. And there, on the far side of the room, near the stairwell, sat Ressa, her ruddy hair disordered, and her scarlet silk robe torn.

A slender young girl, dressed in peasant garb, stood beside Ressa. The girl had a pretty face. Or it would have been pretty were not her expression so grim. Garrin narrowed his eyes into mage sight and saw ropes of rainbow-colored power that led from the girl's hands to twine about the Red Adept. He almost fell off his ledge from shock. The kitchen girl had somehow instinctively mastered a very high-level spell, one that had taken him years to perfect. The situation was much worse than Garrin had imagined. Just what kind of talent, he wondered, did this girl possess? And how could he best the girl without hurting the hostages?

He considered his options. If he snapped the webs around Ressa, the backlash would likely blow out the back wall. But Lord and Lady Vale stood apart, nearer to Garrin than the others. He might be able to get them free.

In a smooth set of motions, he dropped into the tower room, let go of the illusion of invisibility, and set up a mage-wall. Startled gasps arose around him. The girl stared, her face pale in the dim tower light. Ressa gaped for a moment, then shook her head. "They shouldn't have sent you, Windson. You'll just get us all killed with your stunts."

The kitchen girl let out a startled squeak. "Are you Garrin Windson? The wizard captain?"

"I am. And you must be Tira." Garrin studied the girl. Whatever she'd heard of him, it had surely made an impression. The girl looked as if she wanted to faint. "What do you know about me?" Garrin prodded, hoping the girl would say something that would give him an idea what to do.

"Some say you are evil, a liar and a breaker of oaths. The highborn say that." Tira jerked her head in Lord Vale's direction. "But there are other stories along the border, of a man who risks his life to save others. A man who takes nothing for reward, not even the thanks of those he rescues." She lowered her gaze. "Everyone, highborn or low, says you are the strongest wizard ever born. That no one can best you."

Garrin inclined his head. "I am the strongest wizard now known." He studied the girl. "But that may change."

Garrin pointed to the shimmering wall before him. "This wall will protect me and Lord and Lady Vale from any spell of yours," Garrin said. "You're in an impossible situation. You can't spend a lifetime in this tower. The moment you let down your guard, I will be on you. It's just a matter of time." Garrin gave a silent prayer of thanks that the girl had no idea how little time he really had.

"I could kill her." The girl pointed a toe at Ressa.

Garrin shrugged. "Yes, you could. And the moment your attention lapsed, I'd have you."

"I could pull down the roof of this tower and kill us all." At this threat, Garrin heard Lady Vale resume her weeping. He ignored her. "Yes, you could. But I'm not afraid to die. Are you?"

"They'll kill me anyway," the girl said, her voice low. "As soon as they can. That's the price of murder in Alworyn."

"Not always." Garrin raised his hands, palm up. "The king gives dispensations sometimes. Did you mean to kill the cook?"

The girl glanced down at her feet and said nothing.

Garrin took a breath. He never liked to talk about himself, especially not in front of Ressa, who so clearly despised him. But he had little time before the healing spell faded. "My own power came on me suddenly. I almost killed my stepfather when it did. He was beating me at the time."

The kitchen girl looked up, anguish

written on her features. Garrin's gaze locked on hers. "Did you mean to kill the cook, lass?"

"No." The girl's voice dropped to a whisper. "I never meant to hurt anyone. I swear it by Fram's Holy Name. You don't know the things he made me do. I couldn't bear it anymore."

Garrin heard the emotion in the girl's voice, and his blood ran cold. He knew the hell a vulnerable child could live, entrusted to a monster. "I swear I'll help you," Garrin said. "The king listens to me. I'll do my best to see you pardoned. It was not your fault, what happened. Tell the king the whole of it. He'll understand."

Ressa glowered at Garrin. "It takes a murderer to shelter a murderer."

Garrin glared at her, and she fell into silence. Then he returned his attention to the girl. "Let Lord and Lady Vale go, Tira. I give you my word you'll not be harmed."

"As if your word means anything," Ressa muttered. "Liar that you are."

Garrin clenched his hands, wishing with all his heart to pass through his own barrier and strangle Ressa on the spot. Lady Vale rose and took a step forward, facing Tira. "We never hurt you," she said around her tears. "We treated all our servants well."

"The cook," the girl whispered, lowering her gaze. "I can't bear to speak of what he did."

"I didn't know!" Lord Vale protested. "Had I known, I would have sent him away."

Garrin recognized sincerity in the man's voice. Perhaps, just perhaps, Tira would hear it, too. "Let them go," Garrin pleaded. "It will be better for you if you do."

Minutes passed. Finally, Tira looked at Garrin. "You swear I won't be harmed?"

Garrin nodded, then raised a hand to his heart. "I swear it by Fram's Holy Name."

Tira motioned at Lord and Lady Vale. "Go," she said to them. She pointed at Ressa. "But I'm keeping her. She tried to kill me once already, but I trapped her instead."

Garrin nodded at Lord and Lady Vale. "Go now," he echoed. He watched anxiously until they had safely exited the room. Then he raised a hand and took down the mage wall. With Lord and Lady Vale safe, he could concentrate more easily on Ressa's bonds.

Unlike mature Wizards of the Way, who each used only one of the four acceptable powers, the girl had interwoven all four forces to make the bonds: Blue, Red, White, and Gray. Garrin's own path was Blue. Ressa's was Red, an opposing power. If he linked into Tira's web, and fed power to the Blue strands, would he be able to take control without causing a backlash? He could if Ressa anchored him, keeping her opposing power under control, but how could he communicate his plan?

"I saw a rainbow today, Ressa," Garrin said.

Ressa looked up, an expression on her face that told Garrin she was certain he'd lost his mind. "What?"

"It was mostly blue, hard to see against the mist."

Ressa's lip drew into a sneer. "I always suspected you were a lunatic, Windson. Now I'm sure of it."

Well, Garrin thought, perhaps Ressa will see the point once *she feels the spell.* For all her other faults, Ressa did have a quick mind. Subtly, so that Tira wouldn't notice, Garrin spread his fingers, sending thin lines of Blue power toward the web.

Ressa did catch on. Garrin saw the flash of acknowledgment in her eyes, then felt her anchor the power. Risky, but it might work with such an inexperienced girl. A mature wizard would realize what Garrin was doing, but the girl didn't seem to notice anything. After a few seconds, Garrin gave a nod, and he and Ressa both tugged.

Tira spun forward like a top, her full-skirt whirling. Then Garrin cut the Blue line. The Red, White, and Gray threads snapped and popped, but no explosion followed. As Tira landed on her knees, Garrin sent a rope of power to hold her.

Lying on the floor, she looked up at Garrin with an expression of shock. "You gave your word! You're a liar, just as the other wizard said."

Garrin shook his head. "I've told no lies. I promised I'd do everything I can to help you, and I will keep my word. But I couldn't let you harm Ressa. That would be deliberate murder, not an act you couldn't control."

Ressa snorted, but Garrin ignored it. At the back of his throat he felt a faint tickle. He sneezed. His cold symptoms had returned, and he knew from the heaviness in his limbs that Marcus had not lied; he would indeed pay for the borrowed time. "Help me, Ressa," Garrin said, croaking now. "Bind her."

Ressa frowned. "What's the matter

Artwork by K. L. Darnell

with you?"

"Never mind," Garrin wheezed. "Be quick. I won't be able to hold her much long."

While Garrin collapsed, coughing, onto the floor, Ressa set thick bands of Red power about Tira. "We have to — take her — outside," Garrin managed to say. He forced himself back on his feet. The room swayed around him. "One of — my scouts — is waiting. He'll help you — take the girl — back to Camp."

Garrin took Tira's arm, more to support himself than to secure his prisoner. With Ressa behind them, they began the long descent of the stairwell. As they emerged into the tower yard, Garrin spied Mac Tom, who was talking to Lord and Lady Vale.

"Captain!" Mac Tom ran forward, his face breaking into a grin. "I told 'em you'd do it, sir!"

Garrin staggered forward, letting go of Tira. Mac Tom's grin died.

Garrin turned to say something to Tira, a final promise to help her with the king. But as he turned, he saw the ropes of power that Ressa held glow deeply red. Tira gave a yowl of pain, then fell forward onto the dying grass. A stench like burnt meat carried on the wind.

"No!" The scream came from Garrin's throat, and yet it did not seem as if it came from him, but rather that it echoed from the ground. Garrin ran forward, dropped beside Tira, and felt vainly for a pulse of life in the scorched throat.

Garrin rose, rage pounding in his chest. "Ressa, what have you done?"

Her face was as calm and blank as stone. "She tried to fight me. I had no choice."

"There were other things you could have done." It hurt for him to speak, and yet his voice rose high and shrill. "You could have stunned her. Stopped her. You didn't have to kill the girl!"

"I don't have your talents of persuasion, Garrin. Or your strength of magic. The girl caught me once. I didn't wish to repeat the experience."

Mist swirled before Garrin's eyes. A wind picked up around him, sending bits of torn leaves to fly against his skin, as his power eddied and swirled. "I gave my word!"

Ressa sniffed. "Your word. What is that to me?"

The wind around Garrin died as his rage faded, replaced by a cold despair that soaked into his lungs like icy water. What had his word ever meant to anyone, besides himself? For three years, he had lived with the curses of his fellow wizards, their belief in his guilt. Slowly, he'd rebuilt something of a life, but at every turn, the wizards dogged him, making a mockery of his honor. His word meant nothing. Ressa and her kind would see to that.

He closed his eyes, letting the world go black around him, and fell forward on the ground.

"Captain!" Garrin heard Mac Tom's voice cut through the silence, but he couldn't answer. His chest ached with pressure, his lungs too cold and wet to work. If his word meant nothing, his life meant nothing either. Let the Dread God lead him into the realms of death. He would not fight anyone anymore.

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"Is he dead?"

A familiar voice swirled into Garrin's dream. He stood somewhere warm, a light mist swirling about him so that he could see nothing but a distant light, shining like the moon through clouds. Then the fog lifted, and he saw an immense dark plane, without trees or grass, but with a white gravel path that led forward, across the lifeless landscape. The moon above him, gold and full, had no marks upon its surface.

Nedral's land. He knew, without knowing where he'd gained the knowledge, that he stood at the threshold of the Dread Lord's realm. A step upon the gravel path would send him irrevocably into the Land of the Dead.

"He still lives," another voice answered, a deeper voice, and one Garrin had never heard before. "He is yours still, brother, if you will have him."

And then the first, familiar voice: "It is not my will but his own that must

lead him."

Garrin turned his head, but saw no other soul on the plane. "Who are you?"

A slight breeze blew across the stony landscape. "You know me, Garrin, even if I do not show my face. You pledged to me three years ago."

Fram. He remembered the voice from a long-ago vision, the invisible God taking his oath. Garrin bowed his head. "I have broken my pledge to you."

"You have broken nothing yet, Garrin, except perhaps your faith."

Garrin curled and uncurled his fingers. "I gave my word to that girl that she wouldn't be harmed. And now she's dead."

"You take too much upon yourself, Garrin. Even I cannot control what Ressa does. Her will is her own, not yours. Will you waste your life to atone for a fault that isn't yours? Is that why you stand at my brother's gate?"

"I am tired, Lord Fram," Garrin said, staring down at his booted feet, so solid-seeming and yet, he knew, nothing more than an illusion. "Tired of striving to do what's right, when I am mocked and cursed for things I didn't do."

"Yes, you are tired," the God echoed. "And so you must decide whether to slip into the quiet of death, or whether to hold true to your oath to me, and live and suffer and do what it is you have promised me you would do."

A wet heaviness filled Garrin's eyes, blurring his sight. "I can't fight them alone. Not all of the wizards of this land."

"You need not be alone."

"But I am alone. Even my own men wouldn't mourn my death. I have no friends among them."

"That soldier who went with you to Valemist. Would he be glad of your death?"

Garrin, recalling the genuine anguish in Mac Tom's scream, was forced to shake his head. "No, he would not."

"Nor would the others. You heard the girl in Valemist Tower. Two types of rumors about you cross these borderlands. You know where one set of rumors originates. Who do you think spreads the other?"

"My men?"

"Of course, your men. They admire you. They hold you at a distance because they believe that is what you want from them. You do not encourage friendship, and so they do not offer it."

"I see."

"Do you?" The God sounded amused. The light of the moon intensified, until the plane lay bathed in brightness, and Garrin saw that it was no longer a moon at all, but a tiny, brilliant sun. Then, just as abruptly, the light around him faded and went out.

Garrin stood in the darkness, shivering in the sudden cold. One step along the path and he would end his struggle. One step and he would find the peace he never hoped to gain in life. One step, but he knew he couldn't take it. He cursed, and cried, and woke.

He spent a week at Castle Valemist recovering under the care of the castle healer. Lord and Lady Vale, on their rare visits, treated him with respectful distaste. He could not fault their hospitality, but the expressions on their faces made him understand that they viewed him much as they might view a snake who'd rid the castle of a rat. He'd done them a service, but they did not relish his presence under their roof.

As soon as Garrin was well enough to walk, he returned to camp. There, he spent another ten days on light duty, barely leaving his quarters and listening all too often to Marcus's mutterings of "I told you so."

On the tenth evening after his return, the first snow of the season came, thick and white. And on that night, Garrin readied himself to join his men at mess, for the first time since falling ill. On an impulse, he caught up his harp. He moved down the hill toward the mess hall at a slow pace, enjoying the feel of the snowflakes against his skin and the pull of the cold, clean air in his fully recovered lungs.

Inside the hall, he shook the snow from his shoulders, grinning as the buzz rose to greet him.

"You'll be singing for us, will you, Captain?" called his first lieutenant, a man named Lev. Lev came forward through the throng of scouts, and pressed a mug of warm cider into Garrin's hands. "This will help your voice, sir."

Garrin nodded. "Thank you, Lev."

After setting his harp on an empty sideboard, Garrin made his way to his place at the head table. In a matter of

Artwork by K. L. Darnell

moments, Mac Tom appeared with a plate of steaming potatoes and garlic-scented roast chicken. "I got news for you, sir," Mac Tom said softly, as he set the plate before Garrin. "Lieutenant Lev said I could be the one to tell you since it was my doing, after all."

Garrin gestured encouragement, wanting the scout to hurry up with his tale so that he could eat.

Mac Tom wiped his hands on his pants. "Ressa Fervini was called to Worhold to stand trial there."

"And this is somehow your doing?" Garrin felt his brows jerk up in puzzlement, his interest in his meal forgotten.

Mac Tom nodded. "Ressa said that girl at Valemist threatened her. But I was there, a witness, and the girl never raised so much as a breath of power. Ressa killed her outright, she did, for no reason. I wrote it all out for the king and sent it off by post."

Garrin felt a sharp stab of surprise at Mac Tom's revelation. Even of Ressa, he'd not expected such a thing. Ressa had blatantly murdered that poor girl. "She'll get off," Garrin said dully. "It'll be your word against hers, and she has powerful relatives."

Mac Tom's expression tightened. "Yes, sir. I don't expect her to pay for what she did. But still they won't send her back here. There's a new Adept in charge."

Mac Tom made a gesture, and Darran Ulri, another scout, bustled forward, holding a bottle in his hands. He bowed slightly and presented it to Garrin. Brandy. An excellent, expensive brand.

"This is from Anne Horran, the new Adept in charge of the wizards' outpost," Mac Tom said.

Garrin nodded. He had heard of her, a Gray Adept with a reputation for fairness.

Mac Tom gave a small smile. "Miss Anne says she hopes you will accept the hospitality of their hall, anytime you like."

"Nice of her to offer me what is already mine by rights," Garrin said wryly. And yet, he appreciated the offer. He had never so much as crossed the threshold of the wizards' hall with Ressa in command.

He glanced at the bottle of brandy, thinking he could nurse it over the entire winter. Then Fram's words came back to him. You need not be alone. With a jerk of his hand, Garrin pulled out the stopper. "Pass this around," he said to Mac Tom.

Mac Tom's smile broadened. "And we'll drink to a good year to come, Fram willing."

The scout took the bottle Garrin proffered and headed toward the back of the mess. Excited shouts greeted Mac Tom's arrival, followed by toasts in Garrin's honor. Garrin rose and accepted the well wishes of his men. It would be a good year, he vowed. He'd see to that himself.

❄

PATRICIA NOVAK lives in Opelika, Alabama, with her husband, James, her daughter, Sylvia, four cats and two dogs. She is a professor of agricultural economics at Auburn University. Her short fiction has appeared in the **SWORD & SORCERESS** anthology series, *Realms of Fantasy*, *Adventures of Sword and Sorcery*, and several past issues of *Marion Zimmer Bradley's FANTASY Magazine*. She thanks her friend Vera Nazarian for discussions that helped form the seed ideas for this story.

K. L. DARNELL has been a professional illustrator & calligrapher since 1981. In that time she has drawn everything from fiddle fine tuners to feet — from dancers to dinosaurs. Her favorite subject, however, is stones. She lives and works in East Lansing, Michigan, with her husband and daughter.

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The Janitor's Closet

by Katherine Woodbury

The princess slept on the upper floor of the college. The janitor, Mr. Gobbels, kept her in his closet. She had been enchanted long ago and currently bore the shape of an old, battered vacuum cleaner. Mr. Gobbels (who knew better) claimed "those bureaucratic nitwits" in administration had foisted the vacuum on him despite his requests for a newer model. He used the old vacuum anyway and kicked it when it didn't work. Until one day his kick partially woke the princess.

Three witnesses — two students and a professor — saw the vacuum fling its cord around Mr. Gobbels' throat and pull tight before trundling truculently down two flights of stairs.

Mr. Gobbels recovered. And he sued the school. The school fought the case, pointing out that Mr. Gobbels had shown more activity falling downstairs than he had shown in the last twenty years of work. But, the judge answered, negligence does not excuse negligence and why on earth hadn't they gotten rid of the vacuum cleaner when the janitor first complained?

The school argued that the janitor complained about everything, even equipment that wasn't broken, at which point the judge — exasperated — asked why they hadn't fired the man if he was such "a difficult employee". This remark did nothing to pacify Mr. Gobbels who would later make a complaint against the judge to the Committee on Judicial Responsibility.

He won the suit, although the settlement was considerably less than he had anticipated, and the judge reprimanded him for laziness on the job. To be fair, the judge also reprimanded the school for "failure to establish good employer/employee relations" and hinted that, maybe, they should retire the old codger, hmm? rather than risk another lawsuit.

So the old codger, who had considered himself retired for years anyway, was given a reasonable pension, which was considerably less than he felt he deserved, and a party. The party was arranged by Ms. Hardy, the college's head secretary. She didn't like Mr. Gobbels anymore than anyone else, but she considered herself above such pettiness. Mr. Gobbels was retiring and everyone who retired got a party. That was The Way Things Were.

The party was duly held and a number of people came, mostly to eat the food which was supplied not by the school but by Ms. Hardy herself. She was a moderately good cook, her occasional duds considerably overwhelmed by the excess of her preparations. Even Mr. Gobbels didn't complain, but then he feared Ms. Hardy considerably more than he feared the college's administration.

The head of administration, a harried youngish man named Nicholas Edwards, gave the toast, saying, "Well, Mr. Gobbels, you have certainly outmaneuvered us all."

"I did what I had to do," Mr. Gobbels said huffily. "This school isn't safe. I've said so time and time again."

"Your lawsuit was pure fabrication."

"I won," Mr. Gobbels said. He felt the lawsuit to be a source of endless vindication, justifying everything he had ever said. "I won, young man, so —"

But Ms. Hardy was glaring, and Mr. Gobbels muttered into silence. She transferred her stern glance to Mr. Edwards. He shrugged his shoulders and tossed down his glass of ginger ale.

"Simple cantankerousness," he muttered to the Dean. "There are three vacuum cleaners in the janitor's closet, but old Gobble-gobble has to go use the one that doesn't work, says the others couldn't get up the dirt."

"At least you don't have to deal with him anymore."

"Don't you believe it. He'll probably come back to train his successor."

Mr. Edwards slouched to the table to refill his plate. He had a meeting with the internal auditors that evening and doubted he would get any dinner; he had already missed lunch.

"Hey," said one student to another; they were, in the manner of students confronted by food, eagerly stuffing stomachs usually filled by cheese macaroni. "Hey, did you hear what Edwards said about old Gobbles?"

"Gobbly-gook," the other student said. "Have you tried these pastry things? Look out Betty Crocker, here comes Ma Hardy."

"They should've given Gobbles the vacuum as a going-away present."

"They'd never have done that. Gobbles would probably have filed harassment charges."

"Someone should give it to him," the first student insisted, and he and his companion suddenly grinned at each other, eyes glittering mischievously.

By the end of the party (kept by Ms. Hardy to a strict fifty-five minutes), the two students had roped in three volunteers. At 8:30 that night (a half-hour after the last class), five darkly-clothed shapes wiggled out from under the couches in the student lounge. They stumbled and swore through the dark

halls of the school. One of the students banged his knee going upstairs and another scraped his shin when he took a step that wasn't there.

On the top floor, the hallways were less dark since skylights punctuated the ceiling. The students slid around pools of silver moonshine, hissing to each other:

"Where's the flipping janitor's closet supposed to be?"

"Try all the doors."

"You've got to be kidding."

"Turn on the light."

"What about Security? Who takes the blame if we're caught? You, Anderson?"

"Shut up," said the student who had engineered the entire fiasco, his nerves beginning to feel frayed. "Cut out the paranoia, Saunders."

Asleep in the janitor's closet, the princess dreamed of deep booms and rasping sibilants. Rattle rattle, clank clank, shh shh. She wiggled and stretched and then her mind fled to a faraway land and even farther away time, back before enchantments, before goblins and witches and fairies and their spells; she rested motionless.

A student picked the closet lock. He stood back as the door sprung loose from its confinement.

"What a mess."

"You'd think a janitor would keep his own closet clean, wouldn't you?"

"Not Gobbles."

"Heh."

They leaned in, pushing aside the brooms and mops.

"This has got to be it. This thing is a monster."

They tugged it loose, heaved it to their shoulders. Five hefty dwarves, in nature if not stature. They started down the stairs flicking on lights as they went. "No point in getting killed on account of this thing," the enterprising student pointed out. "Anyway, we'll be out of here before anyone notices the lights."

They reached the third floor landing (the elevator was locked down at night), staggering this way and that to regain their balance. Forward one two, back one, to the side one two. The students at the front, turning to begin the next descent, jerked to a stop.

"What's wrong?"

"Keep going."

Shove one two, and then they all froze at Ms. Hardy's voice:

"What are you doing? Put that vacuum cleaner down immediately."

They did. It hit the top step of the stairs, teetered and then bounced, almost leisurely, crash crash crash to grovel itself at Ms. Hardy's feet.

The students scattered into the dark labyrinth of the third floor. Ms. Hardy, hands on hips, opened her mouth, and reconsidered.

She was a lady and ladies do not bellow, not when bellowing will prove ineffectual. Neither do ladies succumb to foolish or pointless hysteria. The only worthwhile swoon is the one with purpose.

She studied the vacuum cleaner. A large machine and still intact, except for the cord flung loose from its notches and lying about the floor in great, looping tangles.

She frowned. She bent her head first to one side, then to the other. There was the slightest crack along the vacuum's metal casing.

She walked sedately down the stairs to her office on the second floor. She unlocked the door and settled herself at the desk as if she were beginning a day of work (right hand poised over notepad, left hand poised over the phone). She rang up Mr. Edwards.

Nicholas Edwards had intended to use his business degree to become the CEO of a large company. He had been overwhelmed at the starting gate of his career by the sheer numbers of like-minded MBAs and, too, he had begun to suspect that the competitive world of business was not nearly as glamorous or scintillating as he had once imagined. Not if it at all resembled the work day of administrative director to a regional community college. One spent most of one's time in meetings. Harrying meetings with internal auditors who asked confusing and confused questions not to mention pesky ex-janitors and irritated faculty wondering why the texts they had ordered had not yet arrived. The day had exhausted Nicholas' diplomatic resources. He sat down to a Swanson's dinner (beef tips with apple crumb dessert) before the inevitable television. He had few to no social commitments. A relationship conducted in monosyllables, abstracted replies and glazed indifference would never flourish; to such a state did his job daily reduce him.

The phone trilled. He told himself, as he always did, "Let it ring. If it is really important, they'll call me back, tomorrow preferably," while his mind filled with images of the college burning, of his younger sister — a terrible driver — crashing over the highway embankment in her Dodge Colt, the car folding like the tin can it was.

"Yes, yes," he shouted into the phone.

"Mr. Edwards? Mr. Edwards, this is Ms. Hardy speaking."

So, it was the burning building after all. Nicholas did not wonder that Ms. Hardy would know such news before himself. He had long suspected that Ms. Hardy patrolled the college at night; sometimes, he wondered if she had any other home.

"Some students have broken into the school."

Not a fire. Or burst pipes. Or a very centralized earthquake causing the gangling, deteriorating, fifty-year-old building to fold like his sister's car. Nicholas breathed more easily but tried to sound concerned. Students to Ms. Hardy were only slightly less anathema than earthquake or fire.

"You'd better call campus security."

"I intend to do so."

"Well — then —"

"I think you need to come over here yourself, Mr. Edwards," and with Ms. Hardy, as Nicholas had discovered only days after his hire date, one did not argue.

"This," Ms Hardy said, pointing to the commercial-size vacuum cleaner.

Nicholas grinned. "I take it, this is Gobbles — er, Mr. Gobbels' nemesis."

"That is entirely possible," Ms. Hardy said after a long and oddly significant pause. "I had not examined the issue from that angle. You see, Mr. Edwards, this vacuum is enchanted."

"I beg your pardon."

"Enchanted!" Ms. Hardy snapped. She paced around the vacuum cleaner. "A princess, I believe. Or at least a lady of noble birth."

Nicholas, squatting, looked from Ms. Hardy's taut face to the jumble of metal parts and electric cord. He didn't argue. That Ms. Hardy saw a princess in a vacuum cleaner seemed, really, no more bizarre than anything the internal auditors had asked him, no sillier than Mr. Gobbels suing the college for one day's work out of a hundred slothful ones.

"She must be awakened," Ms. Hardy said severely. "It is most imperative. She has been injured there," pointing with a long, formidable finger to a fracture in the metal casing.

"Oh," Nicholas said.

He could hear feet on the stairs above. Thump thump. One set of feet descending leisurely. Security, probably.

He said to Ms. Hardy, "What about the students?"

Ms. Hardy sniffed.

"I suspect they have gotten away." She motioned upwards with her chin, said tartly, "He didn't arrive for nearly ten minutes."

He — Officer Beddle — appeared on the landing above.

"Hullo, hullo," he said.

He continued down the steps, his flashlight knocking absently against his leg.

"Not a sign of your hooligans, Ms. Hardy. I don't think they damaged anything. They left all the lights on upstairs, and I had to relock the janitor's closet." His eyes lowered to the vacuum cleaner, sprawled at his feet. "Is that," he said, almost reverently, "the machine what nearly killed Gobbels? Well, well. Do you want me to put it away for you?"

"No." Nicholas said, and "That will not be necessary," said Ms. Hardy, her tone a clear dismissal.

But the guards of the kingdom are by nature largely and necessarily oblivious to insinuation. Officer Beddle leaned his slight weight against the stair railing and talked: a group of freshmen had once, on a dare, driven their automobiles into the courtyard; security had arrested ten students and not one of them had been suspended. Which reminded him of a time —

"Thank you, Officer Beddle." Ms. Hardy's voice had reached a new stridency, but Officer Beddle kept up his remorseless rattle of reminiscences until his walkie-talkie squawked. Even then, he paused to say, "Sure you don't want me to haul that thing upstairs for you?"

"No," Nicholas said.

"No," Ms. Hardy nearly shouted, and Officer Beddle strolled off, jaunty and impervious.

Nicholas sat cross-legged on the floor.

"How do we — ah — disenchant it?"

"We pray," Ms. Hardy said.

She knelt, stiffly, in her long, straight skirt. Nicholas instinctively bowed his head and clasped his hands, remembering Sunday School at ten years old. His teacher had been very much a Ms. Hardy type. As Ms. Hardy calmly enjoined God to "aid the poor child trapped in this dreadful machine," Nicholas wondered if perhaps his teacher in Sunday School had *been* Ms. Hardy. He was in a state to believe that Ms. Hardy was an unchangeable variable in his life; she would reappear at regular intervals, a harbinger of, not grace certainly, but of direction: highly disciplined direction.

"Well," Ms. Hardy said. "Well, that certainly does explain a lot."

"It hasn't changed," Nicholas said, squinting at the vacuum cleaner.

"Of course not, Mr. Edwards. God helps those who help themselves. I was merely requesting Guidance and a confirmation of my own opinion."

"Which is?" Nicholas said, thinking that God would have to be a tough gentleman indeed *not* to shower confirmation on Ms. Hardy's opinion.

"An in-betweener is involved here."

"An in-betweener?"

"Nasty creatures," she said. "Those God spewed out of his mouth." She rose, brushing at her skirt in three brusque motions. "Mr. Gobbels, I believe, has some explaining to do."

"I can't think of anyone more in-between," Nicholas agreed.

"I am going to phone him." Ms. Hardy started down the stairs. "I want to talk to him. Tonight. Here."

"Will he come?"

"In-betweeners are very persuadable," Ms Hardy said, and, before Nicholas could protest, "when they are not up to mischief, that is."

Mr. Gobbels did come, warily, uncertainly, shuffling past Nicholas (who had met him at the front entrance) into Ms. Hardy's office; she and Nicholas had carried the vacuum cleaner there.

"Gobbler," Ms. Hardy said. "Gobbler, is this your work?"

He shuffled and peered and peered and shuffled.

"I hardly like the conclusions you're jumping to, if you don't mind me saying so."

"I never jump anywhere, Gobbler, and I never" — Ms. Hardy sounded positively stentorian — "make assumptions. Did you enchant the young lady in this vacuum?"

"Well." Mr. Gobbels scratched his head. He looked much as he had in court, radiating a dismal aura of self-satisfaction. "Matter of fact, I didn't. They were given — she, she was given to me."

He spoke quickly, but Ms. Hardy had heard the betraying pronoun. "Gobbler," she roared. "Who else do you have in your closet?"

"I don't remember, ma'am," he said sulkily. "And that's a fact. I just do my job."

"Gobbler —"

"I tell you, I've forgotten. I just been keeping them for someone, nice and safe."

"And who is this someone?

"Number Thirteen. The Wicked Fairy. Griselda."

"Oh," Ms. Hardy said. She looked — she actually seemed — embarrassed. "I see."

She strode about her office.

She stopped before the fax machine, coughed and said, "This is Griselda. I enchanted her to keep her from performing more mischief."

Of course, Nicholas thought. That explains so much. Paper jams and faxes that never arrive, despite the insistence of the senders that "we put it through this morning."

Ms. Hardy tapped at the keys, a quick succession of numbers. The fax emitted that shrill scream peculiar to fax machines everywhere. Another scream followed:

"What do you want, Laetitia? A big fax is arriving, and I plan to eat up pages five and seven."

"We don't have time for that. I'm going to let you out, Griselda. I want you to disenchant everything in Gobbler's closet."

"Not everything," Mr. Gobbels said. "Not the brooms and mops and cans of wax and scrubbers and window cleaner. Not the water pump, not the dolly, not the piles and piles of rags."

"You do not work here anymore, Gobbler," Ms. Hardy said sternly. "The contents of the janitor's closet no longer concern you."

"Not an employee?" the thin voice from the fax machine exclaimed.

"They got rid of me," Mr. Gobbels grumbled.

"Retired you," Nicholas muttered.

"Oh, you fool, Gobbler," the thin voice screamed. "You stupid fool."

"I'm going to let you out now, Griselda," Ms. Hardy said. "I don't think I have to tell you that you must behave."

She struck the SEND button three times. The fax machine began to ripple.

Nicholas muttered, "That's a $200 machine," and Ms. Hardy gave him a stern, repressing glance.

The machine began to stretch, like taffy. It slid off the table and across the floor to the desk. A long piece of metal

snaked out of the mass. It split into five thin strips. Nicholas yelped as each strip became a finger attached to a palm. The hand grasped tightly to the overhang portion of the desk and pulled and the stringy metal attached to the hand straightened, transforming as it rose into a head, shoulders, arms, chest, legs and feet.

"Got a smoke, Laetitia?" said the ex-fax machine.

She was a thin, dark, bad-tempered-looking woman. She leaned heavily against the desk, her arm crooked, her hand pressed against her hip.

"No, Griselda, I certainly do not. Smoking isn't allowed in public buildings anymore."

Griselda rolled her eyes. "How have you survived, Gobbler?"

"He smokes in the upstairs men's bathroom," Nicholas said.

That little piece of information had been passed on to Nicholas by the Dean's assistant who had allergies and could smell tobacco smoke five doors away and around the corner.

"Now, tell me, Griselda," Ms. Hardy said, "who is that?"

Griselda tilted her head to follow the line of Ms. Hardy's finger.

"Oh, that. Your goddaughter, Louisa. Bratty, self-opinionated kid. Told me — me! — I was a 'has been'. I've had her enchanted for years."

"Tonight, you will disenchant her."

"Why?"

"She may be hurt. There is a crack."

"Oh, bosh. A scratch. A broken arm."

"Or a broken head. Really, Griselda, haven't you learned any responsibility in my office?"

"I've learned not to give up what I've got. That's my vacuum cleaner. Gobbler takes care of it for me. He can take it home with him if he doesn't work here anymore."

"No, he can't," Nicholas said. "The vacuum is school property. Gobbler — Mr. Gobbels said so himself. 'That blasted machine those nitwits at administration foisted on me.' He said that at the trial."

"Who are you?" Griselda said. "Who is he?" to Ms. Hardy. "Prince Not-So-Charming?"

"I'm —" Nicholas started to say, but Ms. Hardy shushed him.

"He wants you to wake Princess Louisa," she said.

"I do?" Nicholas said, astonishment mingling with bewilderment. "Should I — do you want me to —" how did the fairy tales go? — "kiss it — her?"

"Nicholas Edwards," Ms. Hardy said, and he felt very small and very grubby indeed. "Nicholas Edwards, that is a very silly remark. You should never kiss a girl without first asking her permission."

"He's a twit," Griselda said. "The girl would be happier as a vacuum cleaner. More productive too."

"I am not going to argue with you, Griselda."

"Too late," Griselda laughed. Mr. Gobbels laughed too.

"Griselda," Ms. Hardy said severely. "If you do not release Louisa, I will turn you into —" she whirled around, her eyes flickering over the office equipment. "I will turn you into a ... a typewriter. You'll never even get switched on."

"Cruel witch," Griselda muttered.

She bent over the vacuum cleaner and poked it.

"Wake up, you. Come on, get up."

"I want you to make her human again, Griselda."

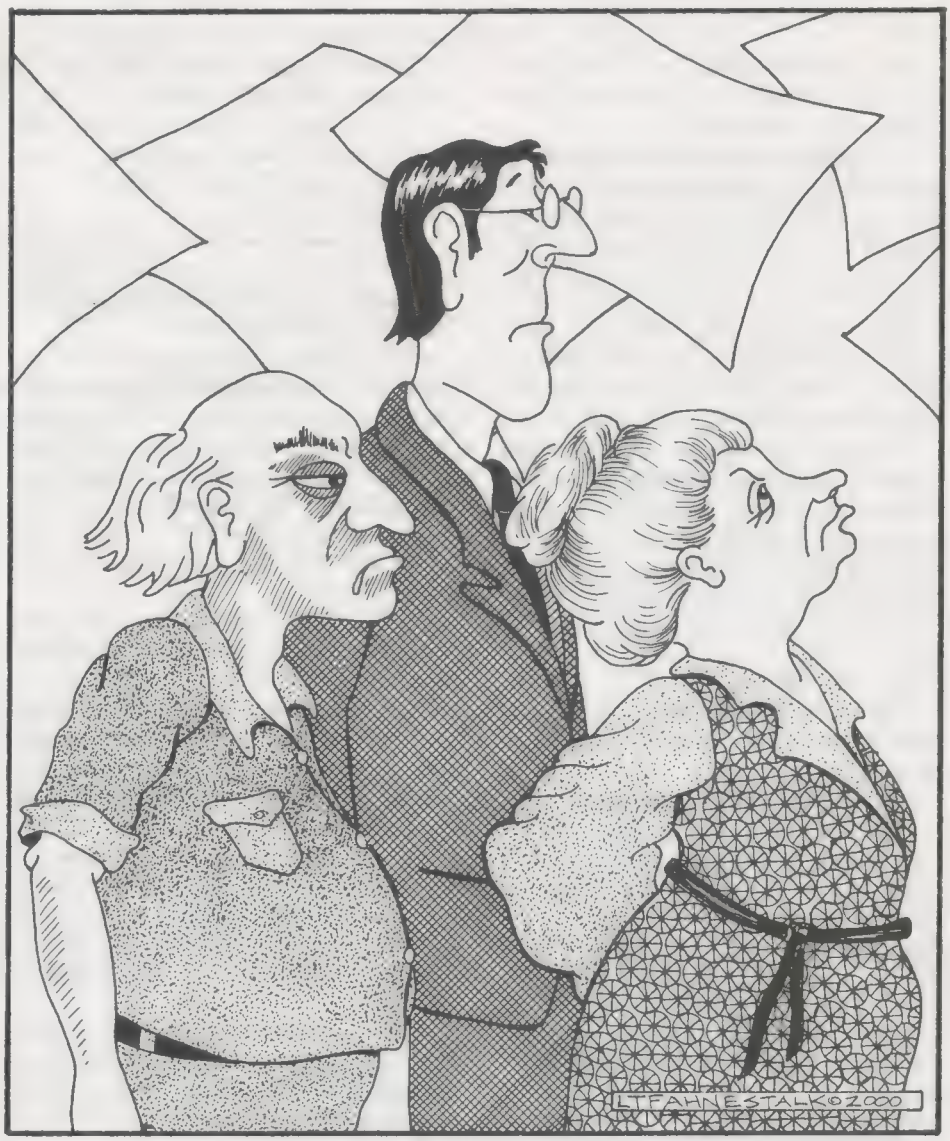
Griselda sighed copiously and began to hum. The noise sounded to Nicholas like the thump thump thump of a copy machine, a working copy machine accompanied by whirs and clicks and little insistence beeps that demand "Add More Toner *Now*."

The vacuum cleaner disenchanted. It did not melt and grow like Griselda. It did not transform. It simply gave way. The bag split, the cord unraveled, the casing burst. Nicholas ducked to avoid the flying pieces of metal. When he raised his head a young woman lay huddled amongst the wreckage.

"There," Griselda said. "And that's taken care of all the others too so you can just stop nagging me."

Princess Louisa sat up slowly; she gave a little groan of pain.

"Godmother," she said to Ms. Hardy



Artwork by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

and then, "Oh," frowning at Griselda. "Hello, Griselda. What are you going to do to me now?"

"Turn you into a frog, brat," Griselda said.

"That isn't terribly original," the princess snapped back.

"Don't argue, dear," Ms. Hardy said. "I'm not surprised you've been enchanted so long if this is how you behave."

"A cat," Griselda was muttering. "I'll make her a cat. Or a swan. Stupid, peabrain birds."

Princess Louisa tried to stand and groaned. Nicholas stepped forward, but Ms. Hardy forestalled him. She slipped an arm around Louisa's waist and heaved.

"Ouch."

"Where do you hurt?"

"My ribs."

"I thought so. Nicholas, it isn't polite to stare, and it is certainly not proper under these conditions. Go stand outside the door, and I will find her Highness something to wear."

The princess, staggering, whispered, "Is he a prince?"

"Yes, dear."

"Bother princes."

"He's a nice boy, and he's going to take you to the hospital."

"What's a —"

"To a doctor."

"Why doesn't the doctor come here?"

"Because we live in the now-a-time." Ms. Hardy pulled a long white nightgown from the drawer of one of her multiple filing cabinets. "Put this on."

"I'll take away her voice," Griselda was muttering. "Or cut off all her hair. Or make frogs fall out of her mouth. Or give her a poison apple. I did that to a princess once but she recovered. They always do," and she sighed, and Mr. Gobbels sighed; life was very unjust.

Ms. Hardy escorted a dressed Louisa into the hall.

"Make sure she is X-rayed, Nicholas. Louisa, this young man is trustworthy so if you have any questions, ask him and don't panic."

They rove their way out of the building, Nicholas holding gingerly to Louisa and Louisa saying, "What is that? How did you make that light appear? What's that for? What do you mean, you're going to drive it?"

"Well," Nicholas said apologetically, "it *is* a Pinto, but it gets me around town."

Nicholas Edwards' social life was certainly flourishing.

Back in the college, Ms. Hardy transformed a still grumbling Griselda back to a fax machine. It would whir and buzz all night long and the next morning a large fax from the internal auditors would be piled in the incoming tray, minus pages five and seven.

"Come along, Gobbler," Ms. Hardy said.

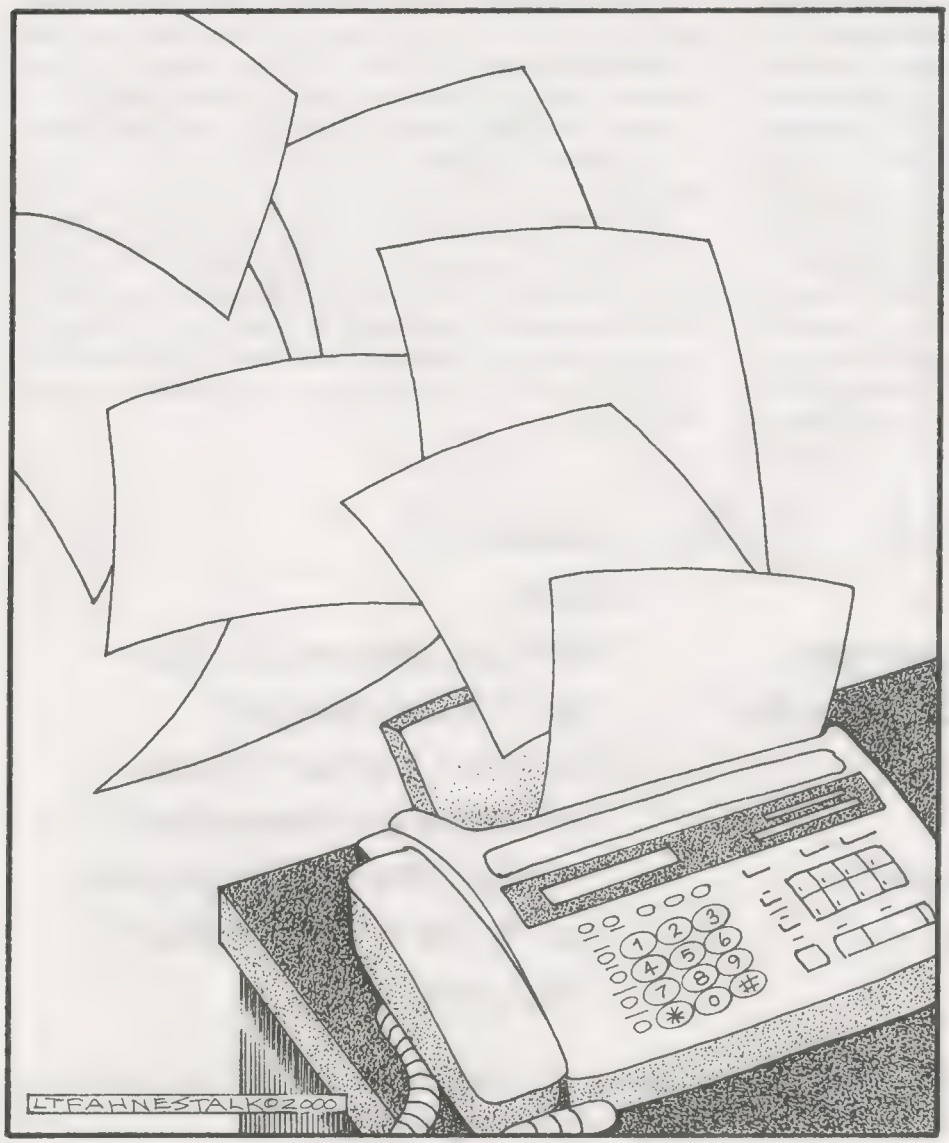
With Mr. Gobbels before her, she proceeded up the stairs to the top floor. She stood in front of the janitor's closet.

"Unlock it, Gobbler," Ms. Hardy commanded.

He cursed and swore, but he unlocked it. He opened it.

Fairies and elves, lumbering dwarfs and kindly dragons, princes and princesses, long-lost brothers, long-lost fathers, sisters, mothers, all came tumbling and rolling and shouting and crying and cheering, all of them out of Mr. Gobbels' closet.

❄



Artwork by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

Katherine Woodbury lives on the Maine mainland, as close to the sea as possible. A four-year graduate in English from Brigham Young University, Katherine has won several writing awards, including first place in the BYU Mayhew Short Story Contest and second place in the Mayhew Playwriting Contest two years in a row. Katherine's first published story appeared recently in the science fiction/fantasy magazine *Space & Time.* Katherine enjoys reading just about everything, especially science fiction and fantasy. She is fascinated by fairy tales, their origins and their applications over time.

Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk has been working as a professional artist for over fifteen years. She is a two-time recipient of the Canadian Aurora Award for Artistic Achievement. Lynne lives near Vancouver, B.C., with her husband Steve.

LETTERS

Cassie Krahe, Freeport, IL

Wonderful magazine *again* — I just got issue 46 yesterday, after obsessing about it for three and a half weeks. I was saddened even more by the details about Mrs Bradley, but am glad the magazine will continue, even if it's changed some. You have a wonderful magazine, and, as any of my friends can tell you, I love it (they had to live through three weeks of, "Where is my magazine?" until I got it! My friends are very tolerant, ¿no?). ...

I noticed something odd, which may just have been me being weird, but did you change the cover paper? It seemed thinner, and not so stiff as usual. All in all, though, it was a good issue. Please, keep them coming!

As far as I know, the cover stock has not changed. Thanks for the compliments. — reh

Stephen C. Fisher, from the Internet

There were two events commemorating Marion Zimmer Bradley at I-CON, which was held at Stony Brook, New York, on March 31-April 2, 2000. Besides a reading of excerpts from her work, there was a panel discussion of her life, work, and influence by Terry McGarry, Patrick Thomas, and myself, who served as moderator. I had brought a selection of issues of the magazine (not just the ones to which I was a contributor!); we found the biographical and bibliographical information in Issue 46 of the magazine particularly helpful. In the course of the panel we touched on MZB's major works, including the Darkover and Arthurian books, her position as a woman writer entering a field in which women were still a distinct minority, and her role in founding the Society for Creative Anachronism, but we agreed that her most important legacy in our field is likely to be her efforts on behalf of younger writers, with particular reference to her anthology projects and the magazine. My concluding comment was that there was no better way to commemorate MZB and to carry on her work than to subscribe to her magazine, and I handed out what subscription order forms I had available. I will hope some of them were used and that others are also spreading the word.

Stephen, thank you. — reh

Melissiah, From the Internet

An error that I particularly dislike, though not grammatical, is the substitution of the American term 'Fall' for the season Autumn. I think it's fine if the story is set in the US, but as for **THE MISTS OF AVALON**, it detracted from an otherwise brilliant story.

I had always assumed that "fall" and "autumn" were synonymous, but if this is an Americanism which grates on European ears, I'll try to remember not to use it. — reh

Candice Vetter , from the Internet

I was shocked to discover, while surfing through s-f magazine sites, that Marion Zimmer Bradley had died. What shocked me was not that she had died, as we all do, but that I had heard nothing of it.

I have long believed that sf writing is a powerful, evocative, original writing genre, and it goes to show how mundane mainstream media really is, that an artist and person of Marion Zimmer Bradley's caliber was ignored like that.

I wish to say I feel great sympathy for her staff and family, for everyone who knew her and also for us, her fans, who will not have any more new works of hers to look forward to.

I have read her writings since I was a young girl reading pulp fiction and I was always pleased that she used her own name, thereby openly acknowledging that she was a female author. I wish I had written her personally and thanked her.

She would have enjoyed seeing your letter, I'm sure. Marion's death was announced in the New York Times, in Locus and Science Fiction Chronicle, and other places, but you must have missed them. — reh

Results of the Cauldron

Stories:

- 1st Place: **"If We Shadows Have Offended" by Emily C. A. Snyder**
- 2nd Place: **"Crow Curse" by Mary Catelli**
- 3rd Place: **"L'Autre Margot" by Jonathan Fesmire**

Artwork:

- 1st Place: **Vincent Di Fate for "L'Autre Margot"**
- 2nd Place: **Margaret Davis for "What the Roses Said"**
- 3rd Place: **Michael Kucharski for "If We Shadows Have Offended"**

The Cauldron ballot is on page 64 - vote for your favorites. (A photocopy is okay if you don't want to cut up your copy of the magazine; please, only one ballot per reader.)

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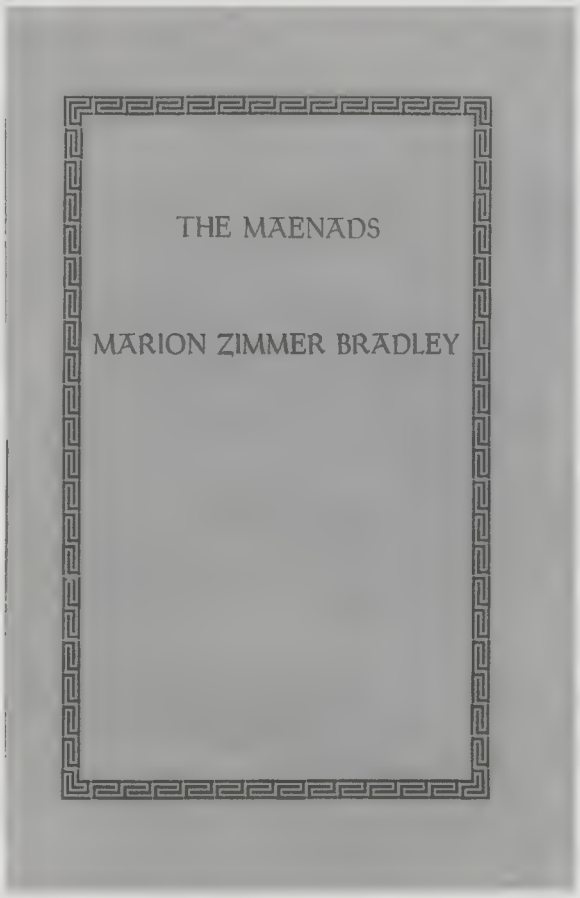

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___#16 **(Spring-Summer 1992)** *Never Look at a Gift Sword in the Horse's Mouth* - Jennifer Roberson. Cover by Alan Gutierrez. Interview with Lois McMaster Bujold.

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__**#45 (Fall 1999)** *White Violets* - Andre Norton. *The Firebird's Feather ...* by Richard Purtill. Cover by George Barr. Interview with Guy Gavriel Kay.

__**#46 (Winter 2000)** *Butternut Ale* - Susan Dexter. *Cup of Songs* by Laura J. Underwood. Cover by Omar Rayyan. Marion Zimmer Bradley Memorial Issue.

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Cauliflower

by Annette Hall

Prince Colin was riding alone, tired and dejected, through the forest at twilight. The boar hunt, though successful, had been a sad one, for he had lost one of his best dogs. He had ridden on ahead to be alone with his thoughts.

He was far from home, and at some point he had completely lost his entourage, so when he saw a cottage and market garden at the edge of the woods, he decided to stop there for the night.

He led his horse along to the side and knocked at the door. The old woman who answered the door just looked at him. She surveyed him from the feather in his velvet cap down his mud-stained clothing to his spurs. Then her gaze turned to the path he had made through her garden to where his horse stood, tranquil in a patch of trampled rhubarb.

The prince's face grew warm. "I'll pay for any damage, good woman. I'm tired and I didn't realize what I was doing in the dark."

"I've no doubt you'll pay, young man." She held the door open to a room cloaked in a glamour of red firelight. The warmth and a smell of vegetable soup drew him in despite the chill of her voice, harsh as grated nutmeg.

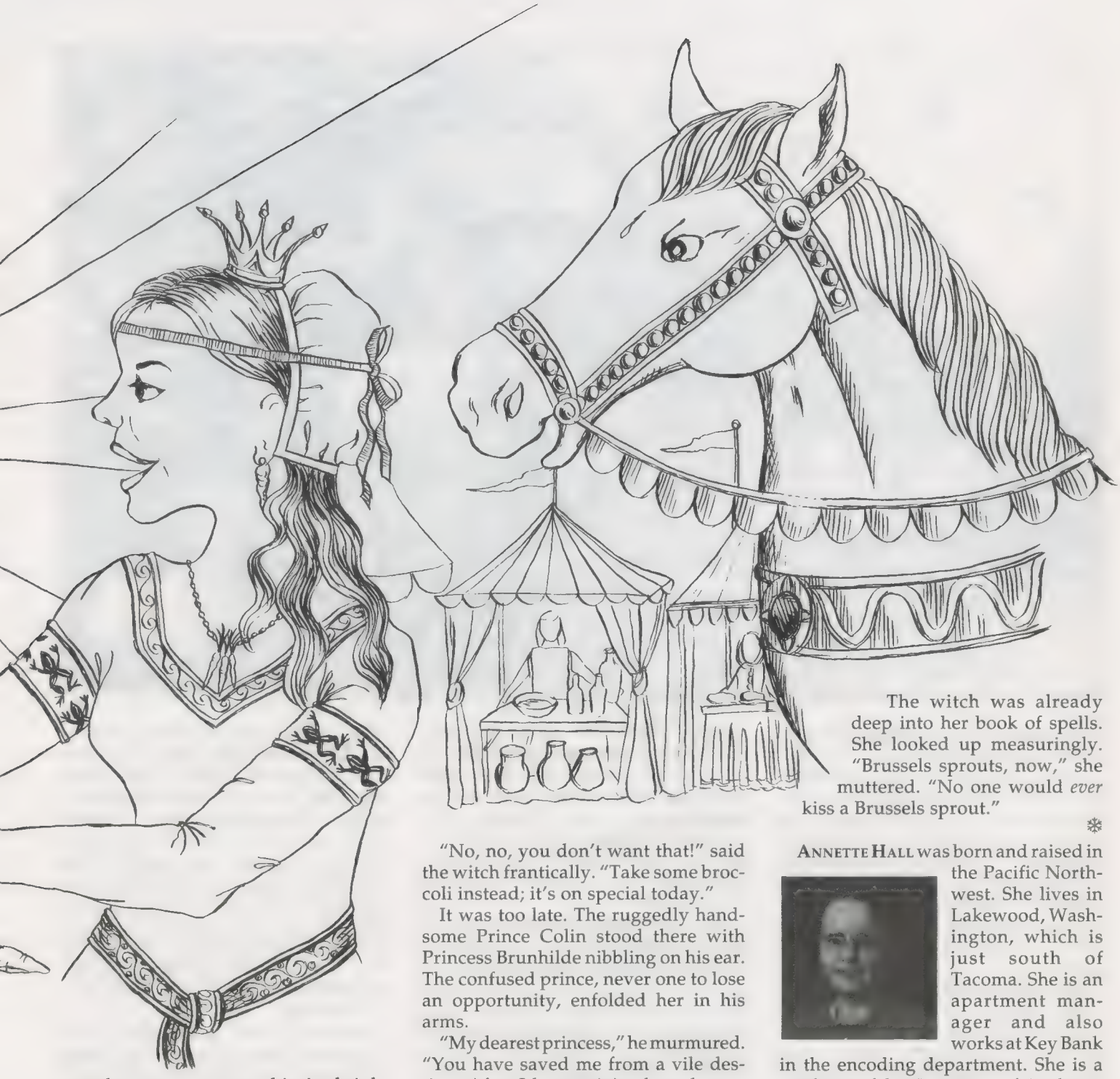
That night he slept wrapped in blankets before the fireplace. His dreams were uneasy, disturbed by the mutterings of the old woman reading by candlelight.

"Frogs, toads ... No more frogs. I swore it the last time. With the current shortage of princes, princesses are now kissing anything that hops. Cauliflower, now. *There's* a thought. Who would ever kiss a cauliflower?"

Princess Brunhilde stepped daintily through the marketplace just inside the city walls. She had just finished a marathon benefit to save the frogs (which had just been put on the endangered species list) and she was *very hungry*. She was relieved to find herself in front of her favorite vegetable stall: Ms. Witch's Fine Flowers & Vegetables — Certified Organic.

"Ms. Witch, it's so good to see you! I

Artwork by Margaret Davis



see that wart on your chin is shrinking," she called cheerfully.

The witch fingered it lightly, in some consternation, "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely, and I'm starving," returned the princess. "What do you have that's good? Sa-a-ay, that cauliflower over there sure looks nice. You've outdone yourself!"

The witch handed it to her reluctantly; this was precisely the sort of person who might kiss a cauliflower.

Princess Brunhilde caressed the florets lightly and sniffed it in a kind of ecstasy.

"No, no, you don't want that!" said the witch frantically. "Take some broccoli instead; it's on special today."

It was too late. The ruggedly handsome Prince Colin stood there with Princess Brunhilde nibbling on his ear. The confused prince, never one to lose an opportunity, enfolded her in his arms.

"My dearest princess," he murmured. "You have saved me from a vile destiny. After I have rejoined my huntsmen and put on more suitable attire, with your permission, I shall ask your royal father for your hand in marriage."

"Huntsmen?" said the princess, extricating herself from his embrace. "You mean you *hunt*?

"Ms. Witch," said the princess, "if you don't refund my money or give me another cauliflower *this instant*, I will contact the Better Business Bureau and they will shut you down."

"What did I say?" asked Colin as the princess huffed down the street with another head of cauliflower.

The witch was already deep into her book of spells. She looked up measuringly. "Brussels sprouts, now," she muttered. "No one would *ever* kiss a Brussels sprout."

❄

Annette Hall was born and raised in the Pacific Northwest. She lives in Lakewood, Washington, which is just south of Tacoma. She is an apartment manager and also works at Key Bank in the encoding department. She is a graduate of the University of Washington. Her hobbies include singing, original needlework, and once upon a time, judo. If schoolkids would stop trampling her rhubarb, she might add gardening to the list. Brussels sprouts, anyone?

Margaret Davis wishes she'd been born in the twelfth century, where she would have spent her time singing, playing the Celtic harp, recorders, and flute, calligraphing, and illuminating. Coincidentally, that's what she does now. She lives in Oakland, CA with her musical husband, Kristoph, and her two tiny cats.

Artwork by Margaret Davis

A Dear Gazelle

by Elizabeth E. Wein

For her twelfth birthday Jocelyn Bennett's father gave her a maid and a unicorn. The maid had been promised to her for a long time, but the unicorn was a windfall. She had thought she would know what to expect as she waited at the boundary of the plantation for her father to come back from Spanish Town with her birthday present; but as her brother pointed out later, birthdays are meant to hold surprises.

She had taken her pony and two dogs along the dusty yellow track, to meet her father at the place where the lines of coffee trees abruptly ended in the wild bush, a tangled wilderness beginning in bamboo and quickly changing to thick rain forest woven with vines and giant ferns. On her own, Jocelyn had never ventured farther along the road than this. She could name all the trees and flowers on the plantation; her older brother Jack, who was second mate on a British merchant ship, loved green and growing things and brought home to the plantation any new exotic fruit tree or flowering shrub that he encountered in his voyaging. But Jocelyn recognized little that grew in the bush, and suspected that much of the green life there had never been named at all.

Her dogs lay quiet and lazy in the pools of sunlight at her pony's feet as Jocelyn waited beneath her parasol, one dog on each side of her, so that when her father finally appeared on the rocky yellow road that led through the bush in the hazy heat, he was like a queerly reflected mirror image of herself: bigger, on a bigger mount, but like Jocelyn with a smaller attendant on either side of him. One was the maid, a slight, dark figure in a drab, dust-streaked dress; and the other was the unicorn.

Jocelyn could not work out what it was, at first. Another dog? It was no bigger than her dogs; smaller, even, a slender creature like a deer. It was not even as high as her father's heels when he sat his horse. Its coat was as dull a yellow-brown as the road, or the dress of the girl who walked at the other side of Jocelyn's father; but a darker stripe ran along its flank, and its head was striped with black and white. Sweeping back from the small, bony head between the small, narrow ears, like a bow, was a single, spiralling, black-ringed horn nearly as long as the creature was tall.

Jocelyn let fall her parasol and clapped her hands. She was sure it was a birthday gift. "Oh, what is it?" she cried. "Father, what is that little creature?"

Her dogs, excited now, ran along the road to meet her father. They jumped and sniffed at the little animal, which reared and plunged and rolled its eyes in terror. It could go nowhere, tethered

Artwork by Omar Rayyan

as it was to Mr. Bennett's saddle, but it moved so quickly that Jocelyn could scarcely keep her eyes on it.

The figure at her father's other foot cried out in a harsh, urgent voice that was surprisingly low in tone: "Send them off! Call them off! Get them off!"

Jocelyn, surprised, chirped to her great golden dogs, and they came obediently to her own heels. The little unicorn stamped and trembled and sweated, and the little maid began to say in deep-voiced fury, "No sense, you —" But she thought better of what she had to say, tethered as she was, like the unicorn, to Mr. Bennett's saddle.

"Would you finish that speech?" Jocelyn's father asked, his voice much deeper than the maid's, and darker.

"No, sir," the girl said briefly. She was not sullen, but it was as though a shutter had fallen across her face, cool and guarding as those of the plantation hall at midday. The girl stood quiet and passive, and the queer little creature grew calmer too.

"What is it?" Jocelyn begged her father. "Is it for me?"

"It's a gazelle," he told her. "It's a little antelope from northern Africa."

"Oh," Jocelyn said. "I thought it was a unicorn."

"It is." Her father laughed. "It's a little miracle. It should have two horns like all other gazelles."

Understanding what the creature was made it seem no less fantastic. It stood bewildered on the yellow road as though it had been conjured out of Blue Mountain cloud.

"And this is Aso," Mr. Bennett said then. He touched the top of the strange girl's head, and she stepped forward to make a little bow. "They're both for you."

Mrs. Bennett, knowing a new servant was to arrive that day, had arranged for appropriate clothes for Jocelyn's maid: plain blue linen work dresses and white aprons, which Aso accepted with neither indignity nor disdain. The sleeves and hem were too long for her; she was older than Jocelyn, but tiny in build, minute and wiry. She was silent through Mrs. Bennett's instructions as Jocelyn's mother explained Aso's duties to her, not sullen, but not accepting, either. Her face remained so blank that Mrs. Bennett suddenly burst out, "Do you speak English, girl?"

"Yes, ma'am," Aso answered without a pause and without rancor. But when Jocelyn's father brought the little unicorn up on the veranda and one of the house servants shrieked in surprise, Aso bellowed, "You will frighten it to death!" Then she threw up a hand as though to ward off an expected blow. She obviously knew not to speak out of turn: but she could not help defending the little gazelle.

The Bennetts rarely beat their servants, and Aso was so clearly appalled at her rudeness, that Mrs. Bennett said only: "Jocelyn, my honey, have your girl take the unicorn into the gardens. You can tie it there until we've had someone build it a pen. In the rose walk, perhaps; it will look well there."

For all her controlled lack of expression, Aso was as skittish as the unicorn. Jocelyn felt that she was looking after two fabulous monsters, not one. She tried to set them both at ease: her gentle hand on the sandy rump of the frightened gazelle, and shy concern in her voice when she spoke to her primly apparelled handmaid. "Were you born on the island?" she asked.

"In Africa, miss," Aso answered in her brief way.

"But you understand English so well."

"I was in Kingston two years with a lady who died."

"Tell me about Africa."

"I must not," Aso said.

"I'm your mistress now!" Jocelyn laughed. "If I tell you to speak, you may. I like to hear stories. I won't punish you for speaking. You must ask me about myself, as well."

Aso made narrow slits of her eyes and shook her head just a little. "I think you don't know how one may be punished." Then she pressed her lips together and would not speak again for a time.

The little gazelle would not eat. It stopped trembling at last, and sat with its legs tucked beneath it in the sunlit grass between the plots of English roses. Jocelyn was worried about leaving it in the heat when she went for her tea on the veranda, but Aso assured her with the faintest quirk of a smile: "It loves the sun."

"Do you?" Jocelyn asked.

Aso gave that single shake of her head, once only, side to side. "My husband lived in deep forest."

Throughout her tea, as Aso deftly poured and spread and fetched and carried silver for her, Jocelyn watched the prim dark hands and closed, expressionless face with surreptitious fascination. Her husband?

When Aso had cleared away the tea things Jocelyn called to her, much in the chirruping voice she used to call her dogs. "Come, let's see if the little gazelle will eat now. Perhaps some salad greens? Cook will let you have them if you say it is for me."

Aso silently left to seek out the kitchens. Jocelyn sat waiting on the veranda until the little figure of her maid reappeared, and then they walked out to the gazelle together. The sun was lower now and the sky was not so hot; Jocelyn liked this time of day. There would be a party in her honor, tonight, after the blue evening fell; already men were stringing paper lanterns in the coffee trees along the drive, and already two carriages had arrived bringing friends of Mrs. Bennett's from Spanish Town. Jocelyn wondered if the unicorn would be calm enough for her to show it to the party guests. She thought it might not like the huge rustle of silk skirts and the clatter and clink of bottle and glass.

In the rose walk, Aso tried to tempt the little one-horned creature with the greens; when it refused, pushing her hands away with its striped and silky nose, Aso turned her dark ghost of a smile to Jocelyn. "Do you know unicorns?"

Jocelyn was surprised but pleased, for Aso had been so silent all day. "Why, no; is there a special way to feed them?"

"You think I mean the gazelle. Do you know about unicorns?"

Artwork by Omar Rayyan

"No more than I know about gazelles," Jocelyn laughed. "Why — what should I know?"

"My other mistress told me stories. A real unicorn only comes to girls who are unwed. Maybe he'll eat for you."

But when Jocelyn tried to coax the strange creature it would only gaze at her sadly with huge, black, terrified eyes as it cowered in the tropical afternoon among the blowing roses, among strangers. Jocelyn knelt by it and frowned; she was used to having her way and could not work out how to cajole these unresponsive gifts.

Then a door slammed in the house and voices were raised in pleasure. The sound of Mrs. Bennett's high, rich laughter could mean only one thing. Jocelyn scrambled to her feet, leaving both birthday presents staring after her, and bundled up her wide skirts so that she could run into the house.

"Jack, Jack!" she cried. And she guessed right, too; it was her brother, home from sea on her birthday, especially for her. He laughed and lifted her to swing her around, then set her on her feet again.

"Many happy returns of the day," her brother said in his quiet, always-laughing voice. "And has the return been happy yet this year?"

"Father brought me a hand servant. She's smaller than I am. She was married!"

Jack's mouth twitched into half a smile that seemed to Jocelyn suddenly very like Aso's.

"And he brought a gazelle with only one horn."

"A maid that is no maid and a unicorn that is no unicorn," Jack said in his soft scoff. "Splendid birthday gifts."

Jocelyn made fists and pummelled his chest. "Scoundrel! Haven't you brought something better, then?"

He smiled a little again, as if rueful.

"Well, I did think it a fine gift when I found it. But it sounds as if Father's outdone me. Show me your new treasures!"

"The unicorn won't eat," Jocelyn said. "Let's bring it sugar cane."

They went out of the hall and walked toward the rose garden. Jocelyn held her brother's hand and skipped at his side to keep pace with his long stride, inspired with new delight and excitement at his return. "Hush, slow down, my honey," Jack said. "You'll fright your pet anew."

"So will you, brass buttoned as you are," she answered smartly.

"You may be right." He stopped by one of the wrought-iron garden seats to take his coat off, and his sword, and then his dust-streaked wig. His hair was very short beneath, a comic mess of tiny curls and cowlicks that haloed his head like copper flame in the late sun.

"Jack o'Lantern," Jocelyn teased.

"Jack-in-the-Green, now," he answered. "Or Jack Straw, perhaps, with this handful of cane for your toy?" He suddenly took a deep breath, gazing out over the tops of the coffee trees to the bush and the thin shining line beyond that was the Caribbean Sea. "No doubt your unicorn is wishing it were back in Egypt, lucky Jocelyn," Jack said.

"But it's so nice here!"

"And many other places, too. But you'll never know how much till you go away."

Aso stood waiting silently in the rose garden, as though she had not moved since Jocelyn left her earlier. The gazelle sat mournful and mute at her feet. "Stop, honey," Jack said to Jocelyn as they approached. "Wait here." Then he went quietly to the little animal, and sat still beside it for a while, then let it lick his hands.

Jocelyn hardly let herself breathe as

Artwork by Omar Rayyan

the small creature made friends with her brother. Its coarse, dark tongue tasted and tested Jack's gentle palms; and the graceful, grooved horn swept back and to as the bony head bobbed. Aso made no move, but Jocelyn saw her eyes go wide with surprise.

"It likes you!" Jocelyn whispered breathlessly, but contained herself enough not to startle the timid creature.

Jack put a finger to his lips, then let the gazelle butt its peculiar head against his hands.

"Why does it like you so?" Jocelyn whispered. She wanted to cry out, but knew better.

"My hands are salty," Jack said. "Sailor's hands. Don't you remember the deer in Lyme Park, how they loved salt?"

"I don't remember England, Jack," Jocelyn told him quietly. "I'm nearly native here."

Then Aso laughed a little, too.

Jack looked up, and as though he had noticed her for the first time, suddenly addressed Aso:

"What's your name, child?"

"Aso."

"Is that Ashanti?"

She gave a single nod, emphatic yet noncommittal.

"Jocelyn tells me we took you from a husband."

"I had another life."

"A child as well, perhaps, of your own?" Jack queried.

She did not answer that. The unicorn began to sniff at Jack's handful of sugar cane, and pulled back its black lips to nibble at the sweet, reedy rods.

"How did you do that?" Jocelyn cried out softly.

And Aso said with wry, daring humor, "It's not supposed to come to a man."

"I'm not wed yet," Jack answered, trick for trick. "See, Jocelyn, my sweet: you have to make it want to live, give it a reason to like it here. Longing for home is a terrible thing."

Jocelyn had never thought about it. People came and went from the Bennetts' coffee plantation, but it was the center of Jocelyn's world. People seemed happy there; why would anyone want to be anywhere else?

"Did you miss England when we came here?" she asked her brother.

"Oh, I am fickle," he mocked himself, "and change easily, like the wind at sea. I miss you, sometimes."

Jocelyn laughed, but a terrible thought assaulted her: could Aso feel terrified, imprisoned and lost as did the unicorn?

She looked at her little handmaid, a tiny, dark figure standing next to her lanky, fire-topped brother. Aso seemed calm and trained, willing to obey her new mistress with grace, yet managing to maintain her own dignity in a peculiar way. "I had another life," she had said. Her life with Jocelyn would be a pleasant and easy one, for a servant, Jocelyn knew; but maybe she would rather be back in the forest of which she had spoken, mistress of her own family. Had Aso been given a choice, Jocelyn wondered, when she was first brought to this island? Clearly the unicorn had not. Both had been caught and culled from their own places, to become her birthday presents. "I'm sorry," she said.

"You mustn't be, little sister," Jack answered. "That's what it is to love." He thought she was responding to what he had finished saying.

"Show me what you've brought for me," she demanded, to make the moment pass.

More at ease now, the gazelle would take the sugar cane from Jocelyn's hands as well. Aso knelt by her, too; the gazelle's rubbery lips tickled their fingers. Together they petted the stiff, sandy hide of the little body, and admired the long, ringed horn. Jack's right, Jocelyn told herself: I must give it reasons to like it here, reasons to

Artwork by Omar Rayyan

like me. I'm responsible for it: I owe it happiness. Anything I can give, I owe it.

And to Aso?

Jack got up and strode back to the hall. He soon returned with a china pot planted with exotic blossoms in fantastic shapes, soft, unexpected colors in long drooping and sweeping petals. Deep purple, almost black, was one of the blossoms; another was a sandy pink and creamy white, like the inside of a conch. Aso gave a little gasp.

Jocelyn remembered not to exclaim aloud and startle the unicorn, but once more that day she could scarcely contain her delight. "What are they?"

"Orchids."

Aso put out a trembling hand, and drew it back.

"They grow in rain forest," Jack explained. "You can't count the varieties, there are so many. Some grow on the branches of trees —"

"Why, Aso!" Jocelyn said in surprise and dismay. "Pity's sake, don't weep!"

She was not exactly weeping: a single tear had escaped from either eye, though her face remained without expression. But Jocelyn guessed what she might be thinking.

"Are they flowers from your home?" Jocelyn asked kindly.

Aso gave her single noncommittal nod, and said, "Very like."

"You must have them, then," Jocelyn said.

"Hey, honey," Jack twitted her gently. "They're yours."

"So's the maid," Jocelyn rallied.

"Is she?"

"She is and she isn't," Jocelyn said with care. "She's like the unicorn."

Jack laughed. "You are a puzzle, Jocelyn, so pampered and profound, so spoiled and so sage." Then he lifted the lovely blossoms into Aso's astonished hands. "So they're yours now. It's a day for gifts."

Then Jack took his sister's hands and helped her to her feet. "You'll have to greet Mama's guests now, I think."

"You'll join me later," Jocelyn said to Aso, "but stay in the garden as long as you like." Then Jocelyn held her brother's hand and headed back toward the only house she could remember, tripping at his side to match his long stride. She thought, in an odd way, that she herself was like the unicorn: an entertainment to her mother, an ornament in the rose garden. When I am older, Jocelyn thought, I can let Aso choose to stay with me, or not. But will anyone give me that choice?

"You're so quiet, my honey," Jack said. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking," Jocelyn said, "about the next birthday, and the next."

❄

As a child, ELIZABETH E. WEIN lived in England and in Jamaica, the setting for "A Dear Gazelle", before her family settled in Pennsylvania. Elizabeth lives with her husband and child in Marlow, England, "between-Maidenhead-and-Henley-on-the-Thames". Elizabeth is the author of **THE WINTER PRINCE**, which was a runner-up for the 1994 Carolyn Field Award for the best children's book by a Pennsylvania writer. Her fiction tends to teeter on the edge between young adult fiction and fantasy; her short stories have appeared in **NOT THE ONLY ONE** (a young-adult anthology), Ellen Kushner's wonderful music-based anthology **THE HORNS OF ELFLAND**, and **SIRENS AND OTHER DAEMON LOVERS**. She is currently working on a sequel to **THE WINTER PRINCE**.

OMAR RAYYAN began drawing unicorns at the age of two, but this is only his second unicorn job since — both from MZBFM! Magazines, books, and gaming cards have been keeping him busy, and he is currently working on a non-unicorn children's book from his tiny cottage in the woods of West Tisbury, where he lives with his one wife, two cats, twelve fish, and a pretentious budgie.

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Artwork by Omar Rayyan

An Interview With Michaela Roessner

by Rachel E. Holmen

I first met Michaela Roessner around 1980. She was an artist, married to another artist who taught at the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland, and she came to apply for part-time work at *Locus Magazine*, where I worked. Charles Brown, *Locus*'s Publisher, hired her, and we learned that she had also worked at a local toy store. Life at *Locus* was never the same. Now collating parties featured the latest toys and gadgets. Mikey's sister taught me to hang a spoon off the end of my nose, a trick we quickly propagated through fandom. But Mikey had a serious side, too; she'd been to Clarion (Lucius Shepard became the best-known of her classmates), and every time a New York editor came to the Locus offices, she'd learn more about how publishing worked, how to sell her work. So I was very pleased to hear she'd sold her first novel and tickled pink when the book won two awards. Recently she was back at Clarion — as a teacher. I interviewed her by phone this spring.

Michaela Roessner: Did you know I've got a website up, with the other Brazen Hussies? It's got reviews, a writer's bio, an essay, lots of other stuff. It's at **www.brazenhussies.net/roessner/** The only reason why it's so extensive and looks so nice is because we're blessed with Vonda McIntyre as our webmaster.

Fantasy Magazine: I remember you told me that as a child, you lived overseas for a time.

Yes, my dad worked for USIS, the United States Information Service, the govern-ment's overseas propaganda branch. They put up a lot of neat libraries that were later burned down.

But as a child, all you knew was that you moved around a bunch.

My dad was a newspaperman — he worked for the *Chronicle* or the *Examiner*, one of the San Francisco papers — I don't know which one — when I was born. Then we moved back east. He later went to work for the government, and after that he did p.r. work. We moved to Bangkok, Thailand for two years when I was seven, then came back to the States so Dad could take foreign language training. Then it was back to Thailand for a year, to Cheingmai this time. After that my parents divorced and we ended up in Oregon.

My paternal grandfather was also a newspaperman. My mother was a musician who taught high school Spanish after the divorce. She'd had a double major at Mills [College in Oakland, a prestigious women's school], in music and Spanish.

I met you when you came to work at Locus, so you must have become a science fiction reader somewhere along the line.

When I was a kid, my dad had lots of sf short-story anthologies lying around. I kind of knew that fandom existed but I never got involved in it, maybe because of all the moving around. I read very few of the classic novels, but lots of the short stories from the Golden Age. That's what got me interested in writing speculative fiction. I was really interested in Jorge Luis Borges and a lot of other authors whose work is very much related to spec fic but doesn't get marketed that way. I read a lot of fantastic literature which was just literature; we just had a lot of really cool books around the house. I think I stumbled onto Borges' bestiary, **THE BOOK OF IMAGINARY BEINGS**, toward the end of high

Photo by Rachel E. Holmen, 1981

"Although I was overjoyed when Shawna McCarthy bought my first novel, **WALKABOUT WOMAN**, for Bantam Books, I was even more excited when after that I finally sold my first short story. It had taken me eight years to sell a short story, *any* short story!"

school, in a library.

Richard will be getting home soon; he'll be getting out of prison any minute. [Richard says hello, and something about raccoons.]

You have a raccoon problem too?

We're feeding at least twenty of them.

Don't do that, don't do that!

(Laughs) We've been doing it for several years now; it's too late. We resolutely did not feed them for a number of years after we moved here, so they were very shy. Then one of the males was injured and lost his tail. So the next fall we worried about him, because it gets really cold here — even now (spring) we're still down into the twenties at night — and raccoons need their tails to keep warm during the winter. They wrap themselves up in their tails. So we called this raccoon "Baron" — he had a little family which included a youngster which had also lost its tail. We were trying to feed *just* them, but it sort of got out of hand.

During the summer, they lie on our deck loungers, on the cushions, like people. I feel like I should bring beer out to them. It's like hosting a Friday night frat party — every night.

Raccoons want to eat the goldfish in my half-barrel pond, and they think waterlily leaves — which are about $25 a plant — are a great appetizer.

They get into our stuff too; they root up everything. At this point, they'll do a whole show at the door to entertain us. The skunks show up too — skunks are amazingly attractive critters. We keep using stuff that says it repel raccoons...*right!*

Nothing seems to repel raccoons except noisy dogs. Anyway, let me think about the order of your novels...you wrote ***VANISHING POINT*** *first?*

No, I wrote **WALKABOUT WOMAN** first, which I got the Crawford and the Campbell awards for.

Part of what astounded people about WALKABOUT WOMAN was that you had never been to Australia, and I don't know how your book would seem to an actual aborigine, but to the rest of us, it really seemed *true.*

At the time I wrote **WALKABOUT WOMAN**, Richard and I just didn't have any money, so I couldn't have gone anywhere anyway.

But even if I hadn't been broke, this whole thing of meddling in aboriginal cultures bothers me — that's what the whole book was about. It was reviewed as a new-age book, and actually it's kind of an anti-new-age book. It's one thing to be exposed to other cultures, and learn from them; that's great. But because we've pretty much lost our own aboriginal culture, we tend to vampirize others. That's what the plot of the book was about. So I wouldn't have gone out to the Outback and said, "Oh, I'm here 'cause I want to write a book about you, so tell me all about yourselves."

When I was going to graduate school for painting, I took courses with Tamara Wasserman and did a fair amount of reading in shamanic literature. From reading the researchers, you get a very good impression of how incredibly disrespectful Western culture is.

In the late 1970s there was a terrific exhibit at the De Young Museum in San Francisco, of the yarn painters of Central America, the Huichol. In conjunction with the exhibit was an amazing symposium of anthropologists who'd studied all over the world. Every single one of them had been corrupted by the culture they'd gone to study, which was great. One folklorist in South America recorded folktales, then heard the shaman give completely different endings to the same folktales and origin myths to a Jesuit priest who was also doing research in the area. Later the anthropologist asked the shaman why he'd given out the different sets of endings. The shaman said, "That man was a Catholic priest. Those people came to my country and nearly destroyed it, and suppressed our culture, and damn near wiped us out. So why should I tell him the truth?"

So I thought it would be a lot less intrusive and much more respectful to read the research that others had already done. I had friends who'd lived in Australia, and I talked to them. Their anecdotes helped give me a sense of place. I also read the extant literature by people who'd done field research - trying to pick those who seemed most respectful of the culture.

Michaela Roessner:

Aikido *sensei*, maskmaker, painter, gourmet cook, and author. Her first novel won both the John W. Campbell Award and the Crawford Award; since then, three more of her novels have been published. She is a member of the Brazen Hussies, three California authors who promote sf and fantasy literature (especially but not solely that which they've written). She lives in the wilds of the Southern Sierras with her husband, Richard Herman, a fine arts administrator and instructor at the Tehachapi State Prison. Her four published novels are **WALKABOUT WOMAN** (Bantam, 1988), **VANISHING POINT** (Tor, 1993), **THE STARS DISPOSE** (Tor, 1997), and **THE STARS COMPEL** (Tor, 1999). The STARS books are two parts of a trilogy about the life of Catherine de Medici. The third book, **THE STARS RELENT**, will be turned in to the publisher some time in 2000 for publication in 2001.

Websites

Bibliography at **http://www.sfwa.org/members/Roessner/MR_Biblio.html**
Biography at **http://www.msu.edu/~lbs/clarion/newsletter/Roessner.html**
Brazen Hussies info at **http://www.brazenhussies.net/roessner/** — be sure to click on the "Manifesto" link
Ellen Datlow's site: **http://www.eventhorizon.com/sfzine/chats/transcripts/100799.html**

The best feedback I ever got about **WALKABOUT WOMAN** was at the World Fantasy Convention in 1989 in Seattle. I was on a panel about writing about other cultures. There were several Native Americans on the panel — Owl Goingback was one — and there was a northwest Native American woman who was a Washington State Living Treasure; she was a folk [tale] teller. And there was Carol Severance, and a couple of other people.

In my nervous, paranoid, guilt-ridden mind, I was worried that the aboriginal storytellers might be thinking something along the lines of: "You f***ing honkies, you have no right to be doing this, writing about our cultures." Even though I'd tried to write **WALKABOUT WOMAN** as respectfully as I could, that was a big concern for me.

But Owl Goingback said that his particular tribe, unlike the Hopi, don't mind sharing; they think they have things of worth for the contemporary world that would even make the world a better place if people would only listen. The other native peoples on the panel were equally kind and generous spirited. Whew! I thought I was in the clear!

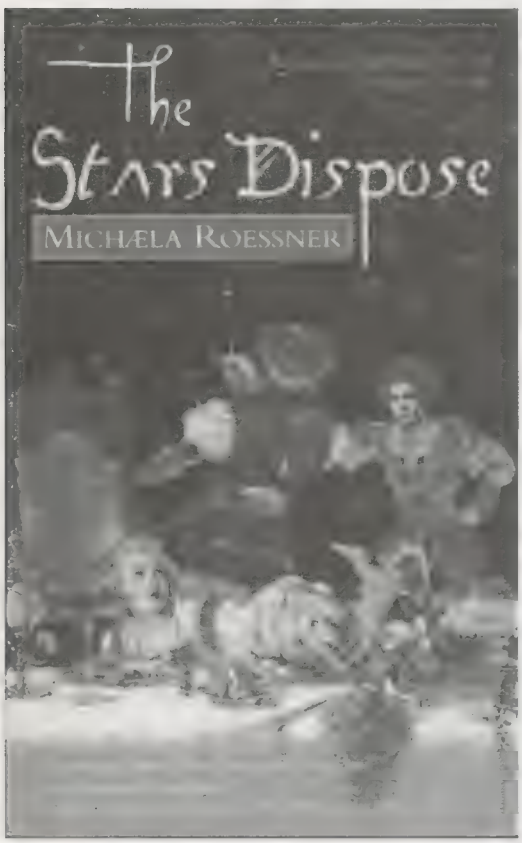
But...then Carol Severance said her husband had done his advanced degree work in Australia. She had happened to pick up a copy of **WALKABOUT WOMAN**, saw what it was supposed to be about, and thought, "Well, this author had *better* get it right..."

Man, I was sweating bullets!

Then Carol said something along the lines of, "and I'm very pleased to say that she did."

I can't tell you how relieved I was!

In fact, it turned out that one of her husband's thesis advisors, Robert Tonkinson, had written one of my sources, a book that Pat Murphy or Richard Kadrey had stumbled across and loaned to me, **THE JIGALONG MOB: ABORIGINAL VICTORS IN THE DESERT**, which was about an anthropologist (Tonkinson) observing a bunch of under-educated, arrogant, not very bright missionaries working with the aborigines — and how the aborigines learned to work the system to their advantage.



I used an anecdote from that book as a plot device, which I worried at the time could be considered plagiarism, but later on I was told anthropologists don't mind if you use their work as source material.

Another thing going for me was that I've lived overseas; Australia isn't anything like Thailand, or any of the other places we passed through, but I am able to pitch my imagination into very different places — as long as I've been careful to do my research beforehand.

I was very concerned about offending aborigines, but at that point I found out that they weren't really interested in what we write about them — at least not in the mid-to-late 1980's. They're more concerned with oral tradition.

Mark Van Name told me that when he and his wife Rana visited aboriginal sites in Australia, at one point they went to a national park, and one of the tourists asked if the site (of rock paintings) told a story. The ranger said the rock paintings do tell stories, but unfortunately he couldn't tell them to the tourists at that time, because the stories are owned by particular families and family members and just then the park system was having a dispute with the aborigines, so the aborigines had forbidden the park employees to tell the stories. "But if you want to know the stories, there are brochures about them right over there," the ranger said. "The aborigines don't care if you *read* them. What they care about is the transmitted oral words, how they're *told*."

Did you ever watch Northern Exposure*? Remember the Indian anthropoligist who was always analyzing American customs?*

I caught a few reruns, but I never watched it regularly. I thought that viewpoint — the Indian anthropologist — was very refreshing.

How much writing had you tried to do before that book sold? Had you written shorter things? I know you wrote poetry.

I had written tons of things. I didn't sell my first short story until after I'd sold **WALKABOUT WOMAN**, and people were saying, "Weren't you just thrilled to have sold your novel?" and I went, well, yeah, but I kind of knew I was going to sell it because I had an editor, Shawna McCarthy, interested in it, but it took me something like eight years to sell a short story, *any* short story. In a way, it was a bigger thrill — it was wonderful to sell the novel, but I was really blown away that I had *finally* sold a damn short story! Shawna was one of the editors doing the Full Spectrum anthologies, and I got a slot in one of those. Most of the short fiction I've written since then I've sold to Ellen Datlow.

Then you went on to do **VANISHING POINT**. *It always seemed to me that the first chapter almost stood separate from the rest of the book.*

No, that was just a setup for the rest of the book, to get you into the House. Oh, you mean the Prologue, with the fire?

Yes, with the paints in colors like "croze".

When I envisioned the book, I wanted there to be a main point of view, but I wanted to weave something together with different kinds of threads. I had always intended to have this image of...essentially someone who is living by misdirection; by the end of the book we know he's completely deluded, but there is a sort of truth to what he's trying to do...he does see things that other people don't, and he's a very sad person. I wanted everything to come circularly back to him, and I wanted the image of fire to keep repeating off and on, phoenix-like, throughout the book.

The other thing was — this will sound terrible, but it really helps — if you have it in you at all to write a really active, suspenseful first chapter of some sort, that's a plus. It not

only helps the reader get into the book — get really sucked in and not be able to get out — but it can help the writer get into it too. In aikido, we talk about trapping people in a technique. You take energy that comes your way, and then you start the technique, and even if you don't throw the person down or pin them right away, you keep whirling them around unbalanced, so they can't escape the technique. In a way, writing is a lot like that. A reader comes to your book with their energy and initial interest, and you keep moving them around — you don't let them have a chance to escape the story. You try not to do stupid writing things that will make them say, "I can't believe this," in disgust, which then compels them to want to 'escape' out of the book. I think a writer has to seduce themselves into their own writing. It's part seduction and part suspension of disbelief. You have to pique your reader's interest.

Once you get more established as a published writer and you begin to have readers that know you're gonna deliver on the goods, *then* if you've got books where you want to or need to get into the structure more slowly, it's okay.

The first chapter of **WALKABOUT WOMAN** and the prologue of **VANISHING POINT** — which was a big setup...you don't think that it ties into stuff right away, but then it really does, all the way through. A lot of the first part of **VANISHING POINT** is downloading a lot of setting and a lot of different ideas, and that can get really hard on not just the reader but also the writer.

Yes, you want to avoid the "expository lump".

And people get tired of just traveling, traveling,traveling, or describing, describing, describing, or informing, informing, informing, with nothing happening. It was hard to write around the descriptions in **VANISHING POINT**. But as long as your readers know that there's a setup already going that they're curious to see pay off, that helps a lot. I was lucky that way with the first two books. It hasn't been that way for the trilogy, but that's just how it goes; when you're dealing with a historical framework, that can be a different situation. And the pacing in multi-volume works can be *really* difficult!

The other thing I really liked about the book was the way you had the very believable communities of people living in the Winchester Mystery House — which I've never actually seen. If I ever go, it will be mostly to see the setting of the book.

I've sent more people there [to the Winchester Mystery House]; I should get a cut on the take at the door.

I recently had a young relative commit suicide. We worried about his younger brother, the weekend of the memorial, but his friends were just hanging together in packs, physically, holding onto each other; the boy was never alone. He never had less than one kid with him, and he usually had six. Your depiction of those kids who've lost other people and won't go to sleep unless somebody's awake, really rang true, and it seems that you would get those kinds of subcommunities.

I ended up feeling very validated, actually, recently; there was an article in *Science News* magazine recently about sleep patterns. Scientists, until recently, without much actual study, believed that the sleep patterns of the last hundred years were the same as sleep patterns have always been. But there are writings that go back into the middle ages where people mention their sleep patterns. Our biorhythms aren't necessarily geared for us to conk out all night. Any culture when you have to worry about being attacked at night — think of the Middle Ages, for example — has people who do sentry duty. If you have to worry about a threat at night, it's stupid for the whole community to be "down". So if you have a situation where you fear being taken at night, then of course you would stay up to avoid that.

I'm sure there would be people who'd deliberately arrange to have two waking and two sleeping periods in the day.

That was the interesting part of writing the book...the psychological theme of the book was how do people deal with holocausts, with Armageddon, with terrible loss, especially the kind where you don't know what happened. How is that going to shape society afterwards, and how is it going to — in the service of survival — essentially scar successive generations? The holocaust in Europe has left a behavioral legacy for succeeding generations. There, the horror was the incomprehensibility of man's inhumanity to man. In my book, I was essentially writing about a massive milk-carton syndrome.

Have you read about the Crypto-Jews?

Yes, I have acquaintances who are Crypto-Jews.

That whole phenomenon fascinates me, that its history goes back — what — six hundred years.

Well, it goes back to the Inquisition. A lot of the Crypto-Jews didn't know that they were Jewish any more; they were still taking part in rituals without knowing why, without knowing they were Jewish rituals. There's a lot of that throughout the descendants of Sephardic Judaism.

We have a friend whose family were old California-and-Mexican land-grant Spanish, and just found out recently that they were Crypto-Jews. Apparently the knowledge that they were Jewish was still intact in the family up until her grandfather's time, but they didn't know until they went through his things, after he died. The family had settled in Mexico as Spanish gentry. This is what a lot of the Crypto-Jews did, to escape the Inquisition's scrutiny in Spain. But then the Inquisition came over to Mexico, to check up on them and make sure they really were *conversos* [converts]. So some of them moved on to California and the Southwest. There's a very good book that came out about the *conversos* and Crypto-Jews called **THE MEZUZZAH IN THE VIRGIN'S FOOT**.

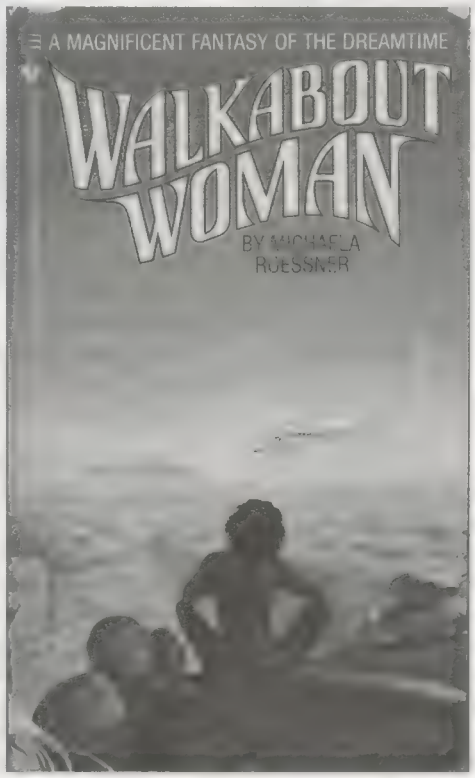
Back to the question of culture: I never assume that a pre-technological group lacks what we'd call "culture". Elizabeth Barber in ***WOMEN'S WORK*** *talks about the importance of such simple inventions as string. She says Greek pottery, for instance,*

is full of pictures of people spinning and weaving who are being entertained by singers, dancers, and musicians.

The question is, how do you define economic security? It's different things to different people in different cultures. I find our culture to be often very poverty-stricken in a lot of ways. You have a lot of things but you have very little thought going on. But I don't want to knock our whole culture because you can find richness in anything.

When I thought my home would burn, I saved my cat, my computer, and every photo I could find. It's what I knew was utterly unique and original.

People save photographs when they're flooded out or fired out. We're a very visual culture. But now most families have duplicates, or photos on websites, so maybe this will alleviate at least that one aspect of disasters.



Talk to me about the two most recent books. Probably my favorite image in either of them — I haven't gotten to the third book yet —

I haven't finished writing the third book yet — I'm in process.

— was when Michelangelo made snow sculptures at Christmas. That's such a magical picture.

Thank you. I made up the scene where Michelangelo creates the snow sculptures for young Caterina. But it's a fact that he did make snow sculptures for her father and aunt when they were little. Unfortunately, Michelangelo isn't really in the last book because historically he's still back in Italy at that point in time.

One of the fun things about writing historical fiction is that you've got all this stuff you can plunder from history. A lot of the anecdotal stuff on Michelangelo came from Vasari's **LIVES OF THE ARTISTS**.

In the first book of the trilogy, where Il Tribolino made a cork model of the city of Florence for the Pope — he did do that. He was a turncoat for a while, but he was also a good friend of Michelangelo's, and he did help hide Michelangelo in a secret room in a church, the room where Michelangelo takes Tommaso in the second book of the trilogy. There are sketches of Michelangelo's on the wall that he and his friends did while he was in hiding.

A friend of mine had just finished reading the second book in the trilogy and was watching a tv special about Michelangelo, and they showed the hidden room and the drawings. She really felt "in the know".

The food descriptions were just to die for.

Well, thank you! I gained fifteen pounds writing this book. When I get done with these books, I'm writing about an anorexic to balance things out. No, seriously, I suppose I can't blame all of my weight-gain on the book — part of it is middle-age.

For the recipes in the book that I list in the back, I tried all of them, and I tried out some of the other stuff, and sometimes I'd just be writing about the food in the book and I'd get so hungry, I'd just go fix myself something.

I did make those fried creams — that was like eating s'mores. You know that I never eat fried foods — but it *had* to be deep-fat-fried, so I made a batch. The first one was crispy on the outside and they are just so smooth and creamy on the inside, Richard and I were in heaven. But after a few, they just seemed gross, and by the end I was giving them away to the raccoons. [The recipe for *fritelle di crema* is at the back of the second book, **THE STARS COMPEL**. -- reh]

Most of the recipes are from cookbooks — at the end of the third book, I'm going to have a bibliography of all the books I used, and it'll probably run about a hundred pages. Long, anyway. At the end of the first book, I have a food bibliography. I used Lorenza di Medici's books, and Tannahill's **FOOD IN HISTORY**, lots of medieval cookbooks, and pretty much anything I could lay my hands on.

Do you speak or read Italian?

No, though when pushed I can fake a passable accent. Remember the other Michaela Marie, Mickey Massimino, who went to Clarion the same year I did? She's of Northern Italian descent. She's gone back to Italy and has relatives in Tuscany the way I've got relatives still in Catalonia. She's also studied Italian during her visits. When I started getting done with the first volume of the trilogy, I sent it to her so she could doublecheck my Italian and give me proper archaic spellings and so on. I didn't do it for the second one because I was running out of time and because I still had my Italian "cheat sheets" from Mickey from the first time. Andre F. Ruaud has kindly consented to help me with the French in the third book, **THE STARS RELENT**.

The thing I found hardest to believe was that a little girl could be so politically astute, but I gather that's historical.

Pretty much. It's a real balancing act, where you have to show young protagonists as being kids, and at the same time, they were pretty savvy.

A lot of the weirdest stuff in those books is the stuff that's true, or at least that was reported to be true at that time. It is true that Caterina faced down the Signoria. That's actually one of the incidents that got me most interested in writing about her, one of the things I found out when I picked up a biography on her years ago. And she was a Medici, which alone makes her interesting. She was incredibly well-educated and very well-spoken. She's gotten dumped on for the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre, but that's because essentially...history is written by the Protestants in this country. But there's a lot more going on there, too. Her family was into astrology. She was a mover and shaker on the historical food scene. Her life was really just screaming to have a fantasy novel written about it.

I loved the first one and bought the next the first day I found one.

Oh, thank you!

You were asking about Italian. When I started going out doing book signings for the second book, I got in touch with Mickey, and she helped me personalize my signature. She translated what I wanted to say into Italian, and taught me how to pronounce it. So I can actually pull off a halfway

decent Italian accent, if I'm coached.

I had a lot of fun with this work, but I don't ever want to write another trilogy! Because I have spent such a looooong part of my life on it!

Anyway, let's go on to three seconds about the Brazen Hussies.

People should read the Brazen Hussies Manifesto, which is on the website. Mostly, we got it together..I mean, Lisa and I have been doing booksignings together for a number of year...but leave it to Pat to figure out a way to actually package ourselves!

Number one, we've gotten more attention; number two,it's accomplished what we wanted it to, which is to get us out there, brazenly promoting our work. Because it's so hard to make yourself go out and do that kind of stuff alone. And it's (number three) a lot more FUN when you have other like-minded writers for company.

I'm boggled by my friend Amy Thomson who has now made two long road trips from Washington State to California and back, by herself, going into four and five and ten bookstores a day...

Pat and Lisa forwarded me some of the emails from her trip; she must be some kind of divine fool! All I could think of was, "She must have a hide like leather!" She's tough. I just admire her tremendously. It was an amazing thing to do...my breath was taken away by the effort she put into it. But I certainly couldn't ever afford to do that, either monetarily or psychically — just the sheer emotional toll alone — whew!

With the Brazen Hussies, we strategize a lot in advance and see where we can get the most bang for our buck. The nice thing about the Brazen Hussies is that, unlike Amy, we have three of us, so we can spell each other on doing tasks so we don't tend to get burnt out, and we have the advantage of three brains — therefore we get to share ideas. So we come up with stuff that we wouldn't come up with any other way, and that's much more fun.

Lisa Goldstein's ***MASK FOR THE GENERAL*** *was based on your mask-making. Are you still doing those?*

Yes, I still make masks. I also just finished up an artist-in-residency teaching mask-making to fifth graders in the local school system, under the auspices of The Arts Council of Kern and the Tehachapi Unified School District. It was a fabulous experience!

I'm also involved in other arts-in-education efforts, trying to write a grant to teach art classes to school teachers, classes which will be geared toward coordinating art education with the ongoing school curriculum.

We tried to get some stuff going with artwork when we first moved here ten years ago, but because of the recession it just wasn't a good time. But now the Arts Council of Kern has a really great guy running it, Jim Johnson. That's made all the difference. And it helps that the recession is over.

(Cross your fingers.)

I know that you, personally know this, but I wonder if your readers realize how devastating Prop 13 was [which revised California's property tax structure] to all the arts. Essentially, when I've worked with younger people, I've found that there's a whole generation and a half that are developmentally disabled in a lot of ways because there was so little arts being taught in the schools, unless they had families that provided strong cultural arts at home. I've run across many who are not able to visualize three-dimensionally; there are also a lot of problems because they haven't had music. We do have music in our general lives, but still... Visual arts and the performing arts — dance, theater, and music — they all got chopped.

They're learning that there's a strong tie-in between mathematical ability and music; there's something about the development of a sense of rhythm that is required for the ability to count, and to grasp that something with four sides is a square.

Exactly. This was actually known in the late 70s, and they still passed Prop. 13 anyway. I don't think Prop. 13 was proposed or passed with the explicit intention of eviscerating the arts, but the arts are the first thing that the powers-that-be always cut.

The California State Board of Education, later on this year (this summer?), is apparently going to mandate that not only will the arts have to be taught in the school systems again, but they have to be part of the core curriculum. This has huge implications. I don't mean that every student is going to take painting, but apparently to get into a state college — this is what I've heard — the state college will require one year of an art on the high school level.

Now, all of a sudden, they're going, "Oh! You write!" or "Oh! You do masks!" or "Oh! You draw!" or "Oh! You're a musician!" All of a sudden being an artist has some value.

So I've been doing longer term artist-in-residencies, and I've got little short artist-in-residencies lined up. I'm probably going to participate in the State Educational Writing Project. It's a good way to earn money at something I really love doing, and after all these years I've found, to my surprise, that I now have a lot I'd like to teach. It's quite enjoyable, and I'm having a good time with that.

What about your writing?

After I get done with the **THE STARS RELENT**, I'm going to go back to writing science fiction for a while.

I'm going to write far-future science fiction... something no one can check on and niggle about. No, seriously, some of the criticism I got on **VANISHING POINT** was from people who evidently have some knowledge in physics — although I checked all my data with friends who *are* physicists. But...I *was* tapdancing on the edge, and knew it — I admit it, and people were trying to give me hits on the science, and I thought, well, those are good points and I would have addressed them (I'd thought of most of them myself). But the way I'd set up the plot, I couldn't got into physics explanations because I was writing from the point of view of the people in the story, who wouldn't have had access to that information. I think critics sometimes forget that as writers we have to write within the form and context that we choose. Although science enthusiasts can apparently take unlimited downloading of technical information, that rarely makes for good storytelling.

Anyway, for the next book after the trilogy I'm going to be doing a lot of research into nanotechnology and bio-engineering. I'm looking forward to it a lot. After I finish that book I was finally going to write my long-projected novel about a maskmaker. But I went to Rio Honda (a workshop that Walter Jon Williams runs) and I was whining incessantly about how sick I was of the Renaissance and how I could not wait to escape the Renaissance.

Sage Walker looked at me, grinned, and challenged me by saying, "Escape from the Renaissance. Now there's a catchy title!" So the second book I'll write after I do the nanotech/bioengineering book will be a far future multi-generational space ship odyssey entitled **ESCAPE FROM THE RENAISSANCE**. And I'll have to dedicate it to Sage.

Photo by David Wright

The Brazen Hussies:
Lisa Goldstein, Pat Murphy, & Michaela Roessner

We have hardly talked at all about your martial arts activities.

I'm working on getting a little dojo going again. I'm back to teaching aikido, just starting with kids' classes first. I hope to get adult classes going again by sometime this summer. I had my own dojo for four and a half years. Just when it seemed like it was going to take off, half of my students left the area because of shifts in employment. So I merged with some friends, Jim and Murphy Davis, who had the only other dojo anywhere nearby, in Taft, since I knew that they were planning on eventually moving back to Arizona and I wanted the opportunity to train with my peers before they left. I trained with them for another four years. Then they did move back to Arizona, just this last year.

So early this year I thought, "I just turned fifty. This is the decade where if I'm going to do some of this stuff, I'd better do it **now**. I can write for the rest of my life, I can do art for the rest of my life, and I will. But as far as getting some of the other big stuff going, it's now or never; if it doesn't turn out, or if it winds down, that's fine — at least I'll have tried, but if I don't try it now, it's not going to happen at all."

I do an hour of low-impact aerobic and cross-training every day, because I can't do aikido on a daily basis as far as my own training goes — teaching aikido is not the same work-out as getting to take a class as a student. Besides, keeping your body strong does a lot for your mood, for your state of mind, so it helps my writing. Walking is also great, and it keeps your metabolism up.

I feel I have ten good working years left: what do I want to do with them?

You have an incredible backlog of experience, and plenty of connections; create your own magazine. When I teach, I often say, "This is something that so-and-so taught me." I always credit specific teachers I've had for specific lessons they taught me that I want to pass on to my own students — I always want to honor my teachers' creativity, their insights. But when you start to develop your own enterprise, it's time to bring your own insights into play — that's your chance to do stuff that you want to do in the way that you want to do it. Don't let anything get in the way of that. And isn't that what writing is all about, bringing our own insights into play in just the way that we want to, to share that with readers?

Thank you, Mikey! ❄

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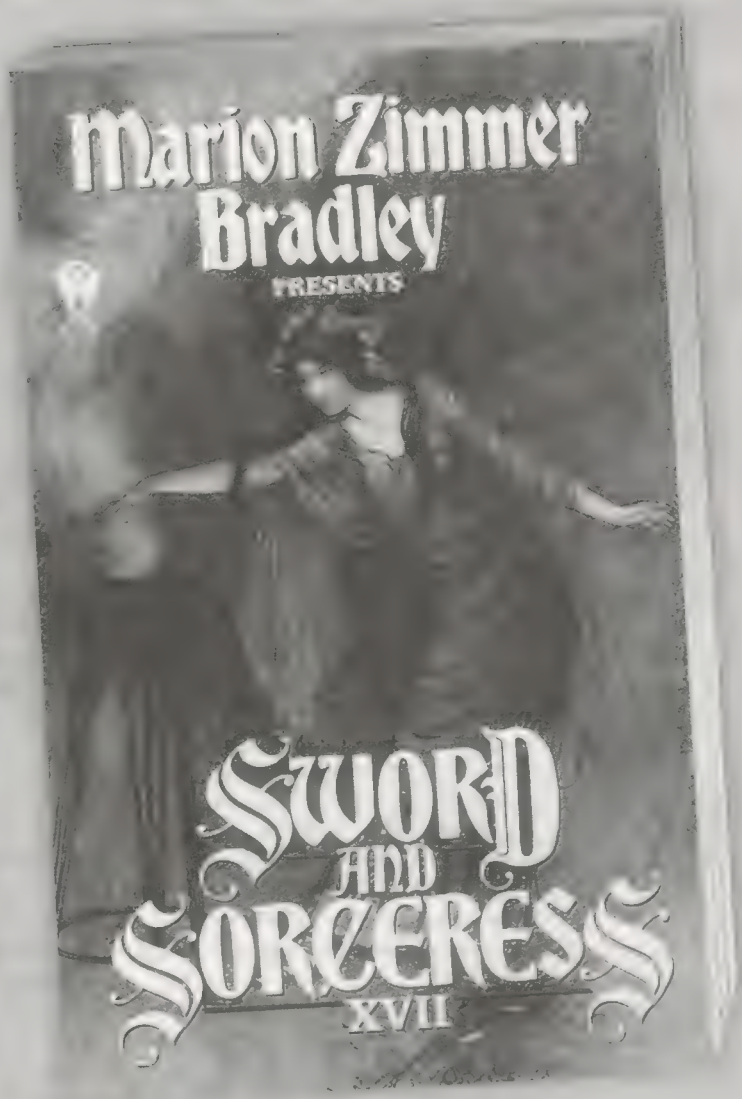

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FAER TRADING

by Lyn McConchie

It had been another bad year. The council had assembled and given its decree after Morwenna's child had died. It wasn't something any of them enjoyed. But it was necessary. If there was no new blood then the lines which had held since the beginning of time would die out. So they would do as they had always done when fate pressed. They would exchange children. A faer trade it was. The children of Faerie grew strong on the milk of human women. Their own would thrive in the Faerie lands.

Of course they must be careful. There had been times when the spells had unravelled and humans had known the trade for what it was. They wove with slow care. Jera's child was well enough as yet but he showed the signs. Her milk was no longer nourishing him. The council spoke and Jera bowed her head. The child was placed on the ground and they circled him thrice. Layer by layer the spells drifted down. The soft chanting lulled the baby to sleep so that he did not cry. It was a good omen.

It was Jera who gathered him up again. "Since the child is mine it is I who carry him." Her tone was unyielding. The Lord of her Howe nodded.

"Carry him then, and because the child is yours, you shall choose."

The village was prosperous. The Lord who ruled had wed almost a year ago and at his command several of his men had wed also. Only one bride had been unwilling. Yet for all her hatred of the husband forced upon her it had been she who bore first. Jera flitted from window to window watching those within. At the first the babe was newborn but weakly. It whimpered as it refused to settle. Jera shook her head. Not that one. If she must lose the child of her body she would take a healthy son.

At the second window she could see the woman. She was fair of hair as was her man. The babe's eyes were blue in the candlelight. Not the blue of a newborn but the colour which would hold unchanged. The spells would hold for a while but if they slipped before the glamour laid on the parents had caused them to forget ... Terrible things had been done to changelings in the name of the Church and the village's safety before now. If Jera must give up her child she would risk none of that.

Four other houses held daughters. It was possible, if the need was desperate, to exchange a girl for a boy. Sometimes it had been done with a newborn babe. Where only the mother and the midwife must be so bemused. But this time the council had decided. The case was not yet so desperate they must risk more than they should.

The seventh house was different. It was larger, more carefully built, and on the back doorstep there lay a broad dock leaf. It was pinned into bowl-shape with two thorns and fresh milk pooled within the hollow. Jera stooped to raise it. She drank. The milk ran cool against her throat and with it she drank in some of the essence of the woman who had given Faerie honor. Then she winced. So! That was the way of it. Well and well. She would look further into this. She waved the watching Faerie back. Then she drifted silently from window to window. She watched, listened, and her choice was made. Silently she beckoned them to her.

"Here. It shall be this one."

"Is it a faer trade?"

Jena nodded. "It is. The baby is strong and healthy. He is dark of hair and grey-eyed. He is two months old so that my son is like to him in size. And moreover, *this* is the child for whom I trade. No other."

Lord Jesterre bowed. "Then it shall

be so." He turned to the council. "Lay the spells. Let none wake."

"None save the woman."

He turned on Jera in astonished anger. "The woman? Of all of them she is the one who must sleep."

Jera shook her head. "Let her remain awake. It is my choice. Nor would you find her so easy to be-glamour."

Jesterre looked at her, his hands wove quickly. He found then what Jera had seen. "One of us?" His hands flickered through a further spell. "Not quite. But there is a trace. Enough as you say to make it more difficult. Very well, since you are sure, Jera. We shall lay sleep over the house. All but her. You shall enter with the babe alone. That is my decision. But if she will not trade, your choice is lost."

Jera bowed her head in acceptance. But she was sure, she waited until Jesterre understood she would not alter her decision.

He sighed. "Child of my heart. You are too much like me. But it shall be as you wish."

He himself led the casting laying the spells of sleep wide to cover the village, and deep to cover the seventh house. When they were done Jera took up her child. For a moment she hugged her son to her breast. She loved him. Parting from him was pain and grief but this way he would survive. The child she took in the faer trade would thrive as well. If she did not do this thing her son would die. She wept softly as she walked to the house, but her steps did not falter.

At the door she laid one hand on the latch and felt it move. She entered the house. It smelled to her, of metal, of food, of the sweat of a man who washed too seldom. She padded to the main room where the babe lay beside his mother. From the bed, eyes the same storm-grey as her own lifted to meet those of the faerie woman.

"You came? I laid spells that you would."

"I came, sister."

The answering whisper was bitter. "No sister. That blood was six generations gone."

"And you are the seventh. The babe will be the first of a new line. Is this your wish?"

In answer the sleeping child was held out. "It is my wish. Faer trade, lady. I have heard ..." she hesitated, "It is said that if the trade is made willingly you will grant a gift."

Jera's face closed a little. Was that the reason then? Would the woman sell her child for Faerie gold? She nodded. "It is so. What gift do you ask for a healthy child, woman?"

"My name is Illeana," the voice was absent-minded. It sharpened. "I want knowledge. Teach me what spells I can learn. If you can, let this child you give me return to you to visit. Let him learn from you also."

Jera looked into imploring eyes and

Artwork by Heather Hudson

knew there was no desire for gold. Only the pain of a woman driven by cruelty to almost breaking. The spells would be used to shelter her and the child from a man who delighted in other's fear. Jera placed her babe in the waiting human arms. Then she reached out to lay hands on the thin shoulders.

"You hate him, my sister?"

"So much, oh, so much. I will rejoice every day that the babe I hold is not his and he knows it not. When I bear again let you return, mother of my son. I will trade willingly each of his get for a child of yours." She laid the sleeping child beside her.

Jera held back her cry of joy. Such a bargain without gold was rare and when it was offered the children were blessed, each in their own realm. Hands clasped. Illeana spoke softly, "Go, I will wait. Come when you can and teach me. Sister?"

Hope rang in the last word. Jera stooped. Her lips touched the girl's forehead in a kiss as light as drifting dust.

"Faer trade, sister. Blessed be."

She was gone, the human child cradled securely in hungry arms. He would live as her own would not have. She would still see her own son, watch him grow. There would be others. In that touch Jera had *seen*. She would have in trade strong sons, faer daughters to give to the Howe. It is well, it is well, she sang unheard as she rejoined her kin. The bargain was better than she could ever have hoped. Faer trade indeed.

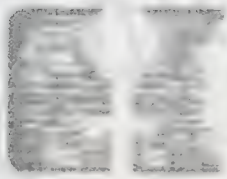
In the house Illeana lay, Faerie son in her arms. He would grow in power. Power to her too as she learned. She would protect him with spells, and when the time was right she would see that her husband departed. She hugged the child gently to her breast. The son was gone whose touch had disgusted her so greatly she had little milk to feed him, the son born in rape to a man she hated. She had given that son away in exchange for a son she could love. One who would truly be hers. "Changelings" others named them. She laughed silently into the sheltering dark. Had no one ever thought, there were times when one wished for things — for people to be changed. She had her wish and was content. The best of the bargain was hers. It had been, it would always be for her, a very faer trade.

❄

New Zealand farmer and writer **Lyn McConchie** made her first professional sale in 1991. Since then she has sold over 100 short stories, eight books and a number of poems and articles. In 1995 her collaborated fantasy **THE KEY OF THE KEPLIAN** was listed by the New York Public Library as "One of the Best Books for Teenagers for 1995". It sold to Poland for 1997 publication and continues to sell in the third printing across the USA. In 1996 she won the International Cat Writers "Muse Medallion" for Best Short Fiction of 1996. Latest sales have been a ghost tale to National New Zealand Radio, and a second fantasy, **CIARA'S SONG**, to Warner Books. While Lyn writes primarily in sf, her work has appeared in the last five crime anthologies from (Australia's) Artemis Publishing, plus mystery magazines in America. In November 1997 she won the JONNY Award from the (USA) Excel-Mineral Company (a $500 check and etched glass plaque), for her story "Death Song" in **CATFANTASTIC IV**.

Heather Hudson lives in Seattle and is fascinated by things Japanese.

Artwork by Heather Hudson



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Just Rule

by Peg Robinson

"An' will you bring me goats when you's Queen, Til? Fat ones for old Gogri?" The troll peered out from under his entry of boulders, red eyes glowing in the dugout darkness. Tilda could hear his nails scrape the packed earth. "I's a fondness for goats. Sweetsy fat ones, all crunch an' marrow an' the horns nice an' hard to chew on."

Tilda twisted the twine knotting of her tunic. "When I's got goats, you gots goats. When I's got sheeps, you gots sheeps. When I's got cows, you eat cheese till you sick." She braced her hands and stared down at the valley below, watching the line of Witch-Wise riders trit-trotting up the river road. She could hear the singing. They were always singing. "An' witchies. Fat, prissy, high-nose little witch-girls. As many as you wants, Gogri. One, two, three — a hun'erd. Crunch-squish." She made a happy slurping sound, juice sucking.

Gogri moaned. It sounded like an avalanche: deep bass rumbles and metallic grating. "Hu-hu-errhu-uh! I keeps away from witchies. You keeps away from witchies, too, Til. Try an' crunch-squish them, they crunch-squish *you*." She heard him thunder down the tunnel — then thud-pad as he crept back. He stuck his head into the sunlight, eyes watering from the glare. "You's my girl. Don't want Til to go up 'gainst the witchies. Then ol' Gogri gots no girl, no nice Til. Don't needs goats, don't needs cows or sheeps or cheeses. You find Gogri old squirrel with nice flies on, lots of wriggly maggots. That good for ol' Gogri. Don't you try to find me witchies. Don't you be Queen. Be safe, be my girl."

His tears were tinged with blood as he suffered the killing daylight. His fingers gouged runnels in the hard clay. "Stay here with Gogri, Til-girl. I's your troll, an' you's my people. Yes-no? Oh, yes! Please, please, yes?"

She scrambled up and slammed a small fist into humped muscle. "Get you back in the dark, Gogri. You fall to bits, stink up the place, you stay out here."

Splayed hands wrapped around her. "You stay with Gogri, leave witchies alone. Don't need no Queen. Need my Tilda."

"You go *back*, old troll. Don't want to clean up the stink, don't want no youngling-trolls fighting for nice, empty troll-cave." She pushed him. "I promise — I think about."

He rumbled ... but let her go, claws catching on coarse fabric. "I go. You *think*. Don't need no Queen. Last Queen don't do nothin' Gogri needs." When she pushed one more time, he gave a subterranean sigh. "I go, I go. Don't like sun nohow. But you think, Til." Then he was gone. Nothing left but the sweet-sour rankness of his tears on the ground and her tunic.

She dragged a grubby toe through the slime of tears, not minding the clotted dirt. What difference? If she was one of the pretty-clean riders down below maybe a gollup of grime would matter. But Tilda was one of the Sauvage. She patted a boulder apologetically. "I's sorry, Gogri. You's a good troll, an' my friend — but you's a troll. I's Old Blood, an' we needs a Queen."

She gave herself a push and a bounce, and stood balanced on top of Gogri's 'front door.' She looked back down into the valley. The wind over the high

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slope rattled the weeds and raised goose-bumps.

The riders had reached the castle on the bank where the Tikai flowed into the greater Dolorai. Bells rang out, magic shimmered, and the grand arch let the witchlings through.

Tilda raised her arm and made the most obscene gesture she knew. "I's off to the Wood, witchies. The Sauvvies needs a Queen, an' I's gonna be it. Gonna be some Just Rule 'round here, soon as soon!" She spun on her toes and was off, string-tunic slapping against slat-thin sides, heels drumming, into the gloom of the Wood.

The Rule of Blood was simple: There must be a Queen in the Wood, Old Blood for Deep Power. She would pay in blood, and Rule in blood; live in blood, and die in blood. The land would live as the Queen lived, and there would be a Queen so long as the Sauvage lived. Without the Old Bloods there would be no Queen, without the Queen the world would die. So it was told, and so they all believed.

It was a hard Rule, but a just one. In return for blood, the Queen had power — power over the Old Blood, power over the land. But when the Wise had come the Sauvage found a limit to power.

Tilda had never understood why. It wasn't fair! It didn't make sense. If you were Queen, surely you could face them down, turn the Witches away, save the Sauvage from hunger, and cold, and scant shelter and slow death up in the hills? What else was power for?

The old Queen had never done so. No Queen ever had. But Til knew the Rule ... and she knew the call of the power.

The Queen had died. Tilda was one of few Bloods left to take the Holly Crown. The Witch-Wise had seen to that. They and their steel-magic, and their songs. The Wise had come, and the Sauvage had dwindled to a handful lost among the cold hills. They clung to illusions, small magics and remembered grandeur.

It wasn't fair.

Tilda loped through the Wood, a scowl on her face. "World's gonna change. Gonna be fair. Gonna be just. World's gonna *change* ..." She leaped over downed branches, pressed through thorn hells. But for all it seemed to take forever, it really wasn't that far.

The Grove was dark, even in daytime. Only the occasional lance of light found its way through the branches of the deep forest. The oaks thinned here, replaced with black fir and sharp leafed holly. In the center was the Stone.

Til stood at the edge of the Grove, panting. The ground was littered with twigs and needles. A few sprigs of poison ivy showed red against the brown.

Around the Stone was a midden of bone: the remains of the Old Queens.

The Last Queen lay at the foot of the Stone. The crows had already been at work, and the flies. The old Holly Crown lay browning in her hair. Her tunic seemed little better than Tilda's. When she'd lived it had seemed like Witch-lady silk. Now the power was gone out of her, and all that was left was twisted string and carrion. And the Knife.

Tilda set her jaw and stepped into the space. She worked the Knife from decaying fingers, ignoring the reek. She'd smelled worse things. Eaten a

Artwork by Nick Jainschigg

few in her time. She'd learned to deal with what life handed her — and as often as not it handed her carrion from Gogri's night-time scavenging. The troll was a good provider, if you weren't too fussy.

Tilda scrambled onto the Stone, crossed her legs, and waited.

She'd thought that, hungry as she always was, she wouldn't have to fast long before the power came. She'd been wrong.

A day.

A night.

Another day.

Another night.

Sometimes she could hear Gogri pacing the perimeter of the Grove, too frightened to pass in, too loyal to leave her there unguarded. When her mind was clear she shouted out, "Get you gone, Gogri. I's fine, I's safe. Sun's gonna burn your hide, you stay out here." She couldn't remember if he called back to her. She thought he did, but her mind turned again. The next clear image she had was of crows squabbling below her as they fought for the Old Queen's bounty.

Live in blood, Rule in blood, die in blood — then feed the crows. But while you lived, you could change the world. The promise of crows was a fair price for a little justice. Compared to the Rule of the Witch-Wise, Tilda found the black-feathered foreshadowing of death preferable.

The second night it rained. She shivered and shook, and let the water pour over her face and into her mouth. It was free-sent, and even in fast she had a right to drink it.

The next morning the power came over her.

She took the Knife, raised the sodden strings of her tunic, and gouged the Queen's Runes across her belly. The blood fell between her crossed legs onto the granite below. It was hot, and tickled as it streamed over her thighs.

It hurt, she thought. It hurt a lot.

She'd dealt with worse.

The last cut was made. The power was not on her, but in her. She felt barbed weight on her head, and knew the New Holly Crown rested there. She felt like Gogri — huge, and heavy, able to tear the earth to its heart.

Tilda shivered, and felt her power grow and spread; felt the blood of the Sauvage huddled in the hills. She could feel her breath — their breath. Feel the pulse of the land. She had come into her Rule ...

"Very nice. Well done." The voice was cool, and amused. One of the Wise ...

Tilda's new power flared out — and met power in return. Now she felt the first stirring of understanding. The magic of the Witch-Wise wasn't rooted. But it was sharp, and hard as steel. Queen's magic flowed over it, and around it, but never changed it.

The Witch-Wise smiled past her short-armed bow. "Your power is great — but ours is greater. We've burned the ore, and poured the metal ... and left the slag behind. Ours is steel-magic. You have the Wood. But we hold the rest, and the rest is what matters." Her voice was Witch-Wise sweet — trained to create music. The Witches could spend the time on music, and beauty created not chance-found.

Tilda staggered to her feet, the cuts on her belly bleeding fresh. Red lines tracked her skinny legs. "'T'ain't fair. 'T'ain't fair. We's the Old Ones. But you's gone an' took it all, an' nothing back. We starves alone, an' freezes, an' you an' yours sings on horseback, with glass bells on your skirt-hems 'cause you don't need to walk on dirt, like real folks. Wherever we goes, you's there already, with your magic an' your snotty-nosed ways an' your heads up high. 'T'ain't fair."

The Witch-Wise shrugged, and her smile was everything Tilda had come to hate in the hungry years. "The world belongs to those who can hold it. Magic belongs to those who can take it. And whoever finds the wisdom first, gets to make the rules." She was beautiful — warm and clean, tall and fair, clothed in green silk and straight as a spring sapling. She looked like someone who got the best, and knew it was her right.

Tilda slammed out — and again the power poured uselessly away. "'T'ain't fair! Oh, 't'ain't fair ..."

The woman chuckled. "Fair is for those who can take it, rag-Queen. What power you have is small power, and the ways you have are small ways. This is the Rule of Steel: you can play tricks on the farmgirls, and tease the shepherds when they're out with their flocks. You can go in a dream of silk, and pretend the tunic under isn't bark-twine, here in the Wood. But never turn your mind to more, or put our mercy to the test. The world is ours, now." She let her arrow drift, indicating the scatter of bone below the Stone. "Not all those who lie there feeding the crows chose to go. Keep your people to the little torments and the Wise won't interfere. Make trouble, or raise your power against us, and ..." The arrow came back, centered on Tilda's heart. "Blood can be drawn with more than the Knife. All your power can't stop a steel-magic bolt."

Tilda glared, the remains of a thousand Queens at her feet. She wondered how many had died by the Rule of Steel. Who would know? All that any of the Sauvage would discover was that a Queen had passed. If the Knife rested in Queenly hands, and Blood had flowed, no one would desecrate the mystery by asking further.

All her dreams, and it came to this. The illusion of silk, the occasional stolen sheep, a cheese from a dairy. Nothing more. Never anything more. A Holly Crown to sting her scalp — and nothing more solid won besides glamour and bitter memory.

"No!" She hadn't realized she was crying until the word tore out of her. "'T'ain't fair. If them as has won't give to them as hasn't, if them as holds won't share with them as don't, 't'ain't fair if we can't even fight, but has to smile an' take it. I won't let my people go hungerin' an' cryin' on the cold hills, an' dress 'em in dreams. I won't tell 'em that's all they's worth. Queen's power may not be steel-magic, but it ain't *nothin'*. I'll fight you low if I can't fight you high — but I'll fight!" And she dropped back down on the Stone, her rags around her. Only outrage kept her from defeat.

"I was afraid you'd say that," the Witch-Wise said. The bow steadied in her hand, the string drew back. Tilda knew she'd die, and rot with the other Queens. The crows would feast. Only a Queen who would accept the Rule of Steel would hold the Rule of Blood.

"Shan't have my Til! Shan't have her." The humped shrubs at the edge of the Grove exploded outward, and vengeance careened into the clearing ...

Gogri. Dear, dirty, dangerous Gogri, come to guard his girl.

He was like mountains falling, arms reaching out, eyes bleeding, hide covered with sores from the unforgiving sun. But he was her Gogri, as she was his Til — and the Holly Crown, and the flapping crows, and the pride of the Witch-Wise could never change that.

The arrow flew.

Gogri screamed — a horrible sound, bubbling and breaking. The Witch bow

was in his hand.

He fell forever. The Witch howled and backed away.

Gogri's body hit dry duff with a muffled thud. He convulsed, kicking, needles and dirt flying, blood covering the mulch, sinking in.

The Grove was silent but for the distant cry of crows anticipating new banquets.

The Witch-Wise shook her head. "I can't believe how stupid they are. Even a troll can't stop steel." She leaned over, picked up the bow, then kicked Gogri's body casually. "One of these days we're going to have to clear out the last of them — they're too useless to hold, and too rock-brained mindless to know when they're beaten."

"He was my friend." Tilda's voice was like smoke on the air — bitter and bodiless, hinting of burning. She knew something hurt — but fasting, power, and shock held the loss away from her.

The Witch-Wise laughed. "Only a Sauvage would stand friend with a troll. Two of a kind — stupid. Useless. If we could rid the Land of both your kind the world would be better for it." She slung the bow across her back and smiled brightly. "I may not have to kill you after all, young Queen." She kicked Gogri again. "Take him for a lesson — what threatens us, we destroy. Rule your Wood. Dream your dreams. And when you think of fighting, remember the rock-vermin rotting at the edge of your 'court'. We can't kill off you Sauvvies — there has to be one in the Grove. But we can kill all but enough to breed. Steel came, steel conquered, and steel stays."

She turned, and started into the gloom of the Wood — singing. Thus the way of the Witch-Wise: always singing, always strong, always spared the price of their own power.

Tilda was the Queen of the Grove.

"Witch-Wise?"

The woman turned, her song unfinished. "What?"

"I's got Rule, and I makes justice. The world is gonna *change*."

Tilda raised the Knife, and raised her power.

The Sauvage in the hills died at the call of her will. She felt them pass.

The Knife sank into her throat and her blood fountained out onto the Stone. As she bled and died the world bled too, with none living left to win a new Crown.

Tilda smiled, choking on her blood, and the voice of the Witch-Wise sang her to sleep. "It isn't fair! Oh, it isn't fair!" Her voice wasn't so sweet as before.

She was right, Tilda thought. It wasn't fair.

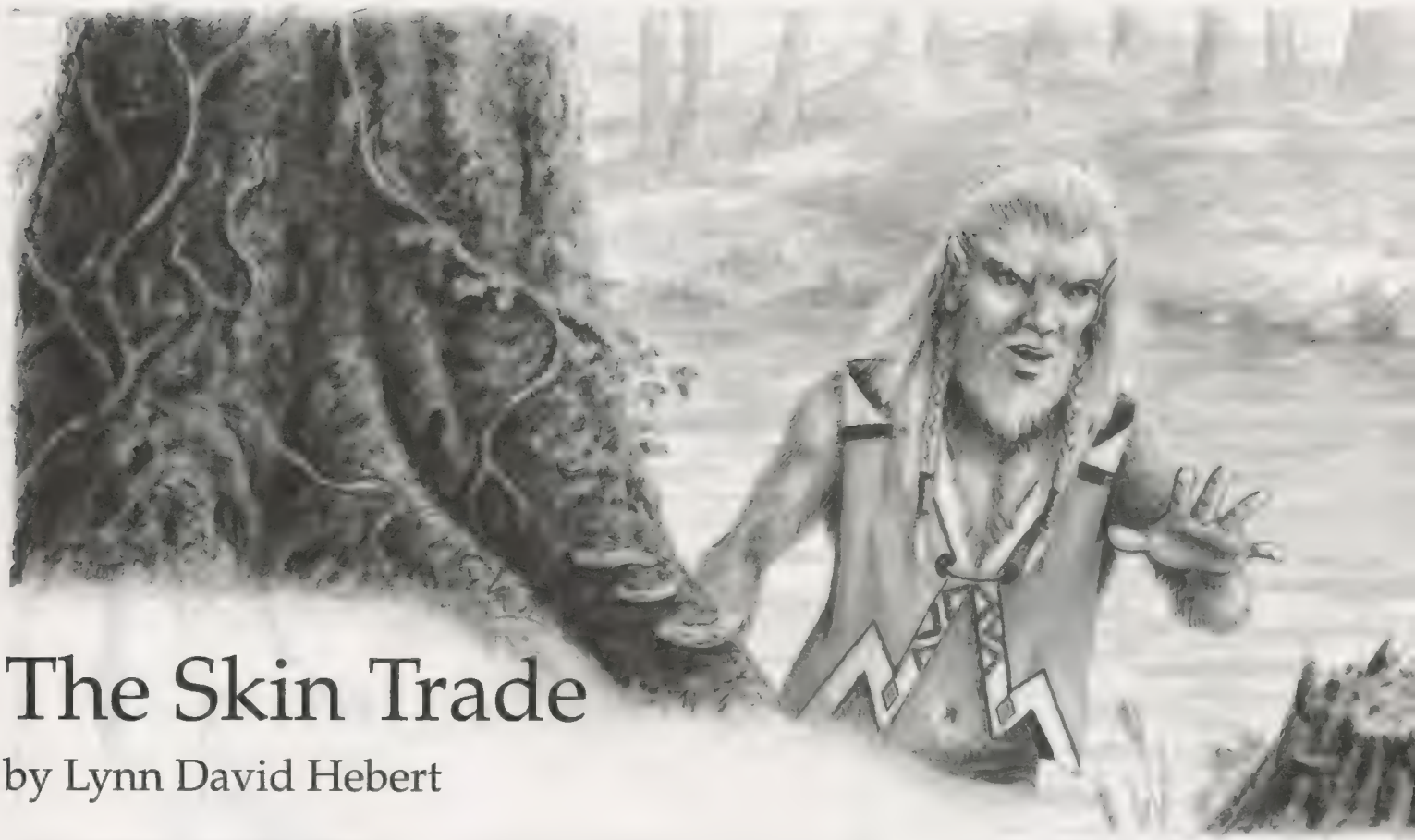
But it was just.

❄

Peg Robinson writes: "I'm forty years old. My only claim to exoticism is to have been born in the former Panama Canal Zone. As I left before I was a year old I can't claim to have picked up much of the local color. I have a wonderful husband, a five-year-old daughter, four writer's cats who try to sleep on my laptop computer, and the mandatory proof-of-aspiring-writerhood — a half-finished novel. I'm a long-time amateur theater buff, a rotten housekeeper, a good cook, an addicted reader, and I write because I'm better at it than I am at cleaning toilets (Cross fingers, knock wood!). 'Just Rule' is my second professional sale. My first was to the Pocket Book anthology **STAR TREK: STRANGE NEW WORLDS**."

Nicholas Jainschigg lives in Providence, R.I., with his wife Monica and a grey-cheeked parakeet. He won the Jack Gaughan Memorial Award for Best Emerging Artist and has been Artist Guest of Honor at Boskone.

Artwork by Nick Jainschigg



The Skin Trade

by Lynn David Hebert

The minstrel Aileen looked forward to visiting her old friend, the silver-tongued Gaelbhan, and she hummed a lilting tune as she followed the wooded path to the Sunelf's glade. Her song ended with a croak as a voice startled her.

"Stop, Aileen. Don't go any farther."

She recognized the accent, but could not see the speaker.

"I've only come to swap stories with Gaelbhan, and to sing the old songs again. What's wrong with that?"

A Sunelf stepped out of the woods beside her, a creature four feet tall and almost human, but for its long coat of silver-white fur.

Few people ever saw a Sunelf, and those who did rarely saw more than a flash of white in the forest, so men called them Spooks. But Aileen had earned the trust of the Sunelves through her friendship with the Sunelf minstrel Gaelbhan.

She recognized the chief of the West Mountain band. "Wolvor! What brings you so far from your safe haunts, and so close to humans?"

"Gaelbhan is gone."

"Gone?"

"Back."

A chill gripped Aileen. To go back could only mean one thing to a Sunelf, and she had always feared the day that she would hear it said of Gaelbhan. For of all the Sunelves, Gaelbhan's heart beat closest to human, and he lived on the fringe of the human world, a dangerous place that other Sunelves shunned.

"May I witness his going?"

"If you wish. Come."

Wolvor glided down the path and Aileen followed. The scent of purple-flowered basil surrounded her as she entered the glade, but as she approached the stream that ran through it, she heard the whine of insects and caught the odor of decay.

A cloud of black flies skittered above the grass, and the skinned body of her old friend lay on the bank of the brook, his hand trailing in the water. Her heart ached to see Gaelbhan flayed of his pelt, and to know that never again would she hear his silvery voice and the rare old songs he sang so well.

The sight of his exposed body offended Aileen. "Why haven't you buried him?"

"Would hiding him in the ground stop his decay?"

"It would show respect."

"Respect? To shove him under a heap of clammy dirt? No. Let him go back to nature quickly in the light of the sun he loved."

Aileen accepted the fact that she could not lay Gaelbhan under a decent shroud of sod, but there was one Sunelf custom that she refused to honor.

"I'm going to settle with the brute who did this. Will you help me?"

Wolvor gasped. "Vengeance? Never! You know our ways."

"I just want to make sure the killer never takes a Sunelf's coat again."

Wolvor nodded and thought about it. "Vengeance would only diminish us. But if you plan to convince men not to steal our skins, then we could help."

"Will you be here if I need you?"

The Sunelf shook his head. "I've stayed too long as it is. Gaelbhan lived too close to humans. They're not all like you."

"On your mountain, then. Where can I find you?"

"We'll find *you* if you go there. Good traveling, Aileen."

"Good traveling, Wolvor."

Aileen strode quickly from the glade, for it's best not to linger by the dead, and she took the low way down off the mountain. Whoever had a thing as rare

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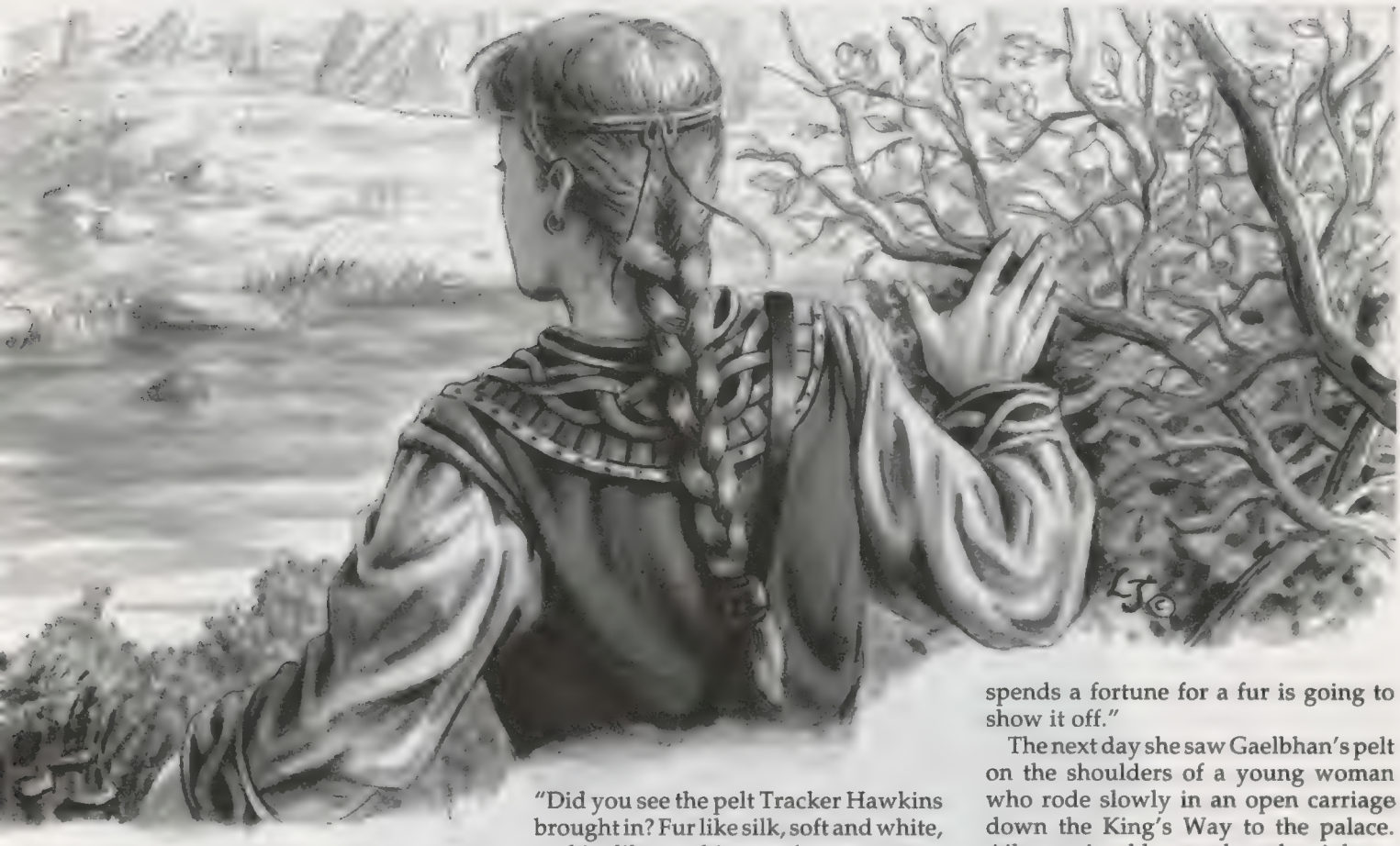

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as a Sunelf pelt would surely go to the markets of The Landing.

On her way she met a hunter climbing into the hills, a youth who carried his spear awkwardly, and who walked with the pigeon-toed gait of a city dweller.

"How's the hunting?" Aileen asked.

The lad only shrugged. "I haven't seen one yet, and you're going the wrong way. Spooks live up in the mountains."

So, Gaelbhan's pelt had already stirred men's greed. Aileen strode faster now, but doubt gripped her. Should she be going to the city when killers roamed the mountains? Still, the wilderness was vast and the city small, and perhaps her best chance to stop the trouble lay at its source.

In the evening, she sat by the fire at the sign of The Copper Kettle, where she used her tales and songs to bring the conversation around to Spooks.

"I seen one once," an old-timer said. "High on the mountain, and just a wisp of silver among the trees. That was long ago and they were rare then. Never see them now. They're gone, like all the old things."

"I don't think so," a young man said. "Did you see the pelt Tracker Hawkins brought in? Fur like silk, soft and white, a skin like nothing we've ever seen before."

The old man smiled but shook his head. "Albino wolf."

"Not a chance. Too long and thick in the legs, and it had no tail. Who sells a wolf hide without the tail? It's got to be a Spook."

"A Spook hide?" Aileen asked. "Where'd he get it?"

"In the mountains, but Tracker ain't saying exactly where. You or me, we'd work a year for the money he made on that one hide."

"He can keep his secrets," Aileen said, "but I bet he could tell a great hunting story. I'd like to hear it."

"Good luck. If I know him, he'll be at The Boar's Tusk and roaring drunk day and night until his money runs out. Listening to a drunk Tracker is worse than listening to an idiot."

No hurry then, Aileen thought. Booze would keep a good rein on Gaelbhan's killer until she found her chance to settle. "Where can I see the pelt, then? Who has it?"

"Who has everything that's rare and costly, and likes nothing better than to show it off?" the old-timer said. "Stand in the square by Batair's palace and watch who rides by. Anyone who spends a fortune for a fur is going to show it off."

The next day she saw Gaelbhan's pelt on the shoulders of a young woman who rode slowly in an open carriage down the King's Way to the palace. Aileen gritted her teeth at the sight.

"Who was that?" she asked of an old woman.

"The Princess Ciarda," the woman answered. "Batair's only child and heir."

"She has beautiful clothes."

"Aye. And don't she know it?" The woman snorted in contempt. "Every day she rides through town to show her stuff, and let us know who's going to be queen."

"And set the fashion?"

"That stole is the latest craze, but the price of silver fox has shot to the stars. Who can afford it?" The woman shook the tattered edge of her shawl to emphasize her point.

"That stole didn't look like silver fox."

"I hear it's Spook. Imagine that. I always thought Spooks were fairy tales."

"But there it is."

"Crazy! Workers leaving their jobs, merchants closing their shops, everyone heading into the hills after easy money." She shook a finger at Aileen. "But how many will come back with a Spook pelt?"

Aileen hoped the answer would be none, and she knew she couldn't stay any longer in The Landing. With so

many hunters pouring into the mountains, her business with Trapper Hawkins could wait.

The Sunelves found her as she roamed in a glen too remote for a casual hunter to bother with, but not too far for a killer who sought the one pelt that would make him rich.

Two dozen Sunelves, young and old, sat around her while others stood guard in the woods. "I found the killer who stole Gaelbhan's hide," she told them, "and the princess Ciarda parades it as a royal treasure in The Landing. Hunters are pouring into these hills to find more. Guard your people and your skins well."

"Gaelbhan was careless," Wolvor said. "Men have left us alone for so long he thought they had forgotten us. We will watch."

"And so will those who hunt you. Just one careless moment and you're dead. I know you hate vengeance, but you've got to show the hunters that you Sunelves won't give up your hides. Show them that the price of a silver pelt is far too high."

Wolvor shook his head. "Better to lose our hides than our ways, but why would men take our skins? Don't they have skins of their own?"

"They like yours better. Humans gain status when they wear your silver fur. If you don't stop them, then you will die. It's that simple."

Wolvor sighed and thought for a while. "Perhaps you're right," he said. "Entertain the young ones while we hold council."

Few times are so rare that you'd have them last forever, but that evening with the Sunelf youngsters was such a time for Aileen. They frolicked with the grace of bounding deer, and they sang in voices so high and pure that Aileen's fingers danced with inspired magic on her harp strings. Never again would a Sunelf rot in the forest for the sake of its pelt. Aileen swore it.

At last she slept, and when she woke in the morning Wolvor sat beside her, waiting patiently. "The council has decided," he said. "We cannot condone vengeance. We can only be kind, even to those who hurt us."

Aileen groaned. "Stop the hunting or you will die. Can't you understand that?"

"Let me finish. I only said we cannot take vengeance, but sometimes the best

way to stop a thing is to help it. Here. Take this."

The Sunelf held a small bottle out to Aileen. "See that the princess drinks this potion. We labored all night on it, and have put our greatest magic into it."

"Why the princess? Trapper Hawkins is the killer."

"Hawkins killed for money. The princess is the one that paid the money, and who wears Gaelbhan's coat."

Aileen took the bottle. "What will it do?"

"Kill her desire for our hides. Stop the money and you stop the hunters."

"I don't know if I can get close enough to put it in her food or drink."

"We labored all night to make it strong. Pour it into a lake, and if she takes but a drop of the water, it would be enough. Don't worry if others drink it too. Its magic will only strike whoever wears a Sunelf's fur."

The next day Aileen played in the square before Batair's palace. There she watched a servant carry a yoke of water pails to a well at the edge of the square, and lug them dripping back to the palace. When she saw the water carrier again, Aileen walked to the well for a drink and lowered the bucket as the servant approached.

"I won't be long," Aileen said. "Singing in this heat makes me dry, and a good song needs a wet throat."

"No hurry," the servant answered. "Hauling water gets tiresome."

"Has the aqueduct gone dry?"

The servant laughed. "In the summer the aqueduct goes bad. Can't serve swamp water at Batair's table."

Aileen had found her vehicle for delivering the potion, and perhaps a way to see if it worked. "Does he hire minstrels to entertain at dinner?"

"Yes, and I'll bet a singer like you could earn a heavy purse. If I put in a word for you, will you slip me a coin from that purse?"

"Gladly."

The servant left and Aileen dumped Wolvor's potion into the well. She sampled the water again and it tasted as sweet as before. The Sunelf's potion hid in it as craftily as Wolvor himself hid in his forest.

Three days later Aileen stood near the head table in Batair's hall. Talk and laughter from a hundred guests rang in her ears, and she knew she would have to sing loudly for even the head table to hear her. Ciarda sat by her father, and wore her silver stole. The potion hadn't

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quelled her desire for a Sunelf's fur, at least not yet.

"Music!" Batair roared, looking toward the minstrel. Aileen strummed her harp and the conversation lowered, but did not stop. She pitched her voice high to cut through the murmur, and sang a song that Gaelbhan had taught her:

"Stay at home," her lover warned her.
"Shun the meadows. Fear the mountains.

"Shadows stalk the mists at twilight.
"Specters haunt the fogs of dawn."

"Spooks and specters," laughed the maiden,
"Scare a child, not a woman."

So she wandered past the shielding,
Where the wild ranges beckoned.

There she found a mountain Spook
Dancing in a sunlit meadow.

Coat of silver, soft and silken,
Eyes as deep as sky in water.

Voice as soft as evening breezes,
Breath as sweet as clover honey.

Long they talked and played together,
Innocent as children's laughter.

"May my child be as merry
as you Spooks," she said in parting.

Then forgot her mountain playmate.
Wed her lover, bore their son.

Eyes as blue as sky in water,
Coat of silver, smooth and silken.

So they drove them from the shielding,
Shunned and homeless on the mountain.

Now her son, not Spook nor human,
Roams between two worlds alone.

She finished and saw that Ciarda stroked her fur stole gently. "A strange song, minstrel. Where did you learn it?"

"From a Spook, your highness. A Spook named Gaelbhan. The very one whose skin you wear."

Smiling in amusement, she raised the stole over her head and smoothed it out before her on the table. "This was just an animal. How could it sing like that?"

"He had a spirit as fine as yours or mine. He had a soul, and he knew a thousand songs. Shall I sing you more?"

"No," she said, wrapping the stole around her shoulders again and stroking the fur. "Sing your own songs, or ours. Sing something happy."

Aileen nodded and hid her disappointment as she adjusted the tuning of a string to give her time to think of her next song. Desire for Gaelbhan's skin certainly hadn't died in Ciarda. Perhaps the potion didn't work after all. Don't trust in magic, she thought, when you can trust your own strong arms.

She started to sing again when Batair interrupted her. "Minstrel, sing some more of Gaelbhan's songs." Ciarda scowled but Batair patted her hand. "We don't often hear new songs," he told her. "And I want to know more about this silver skin I bought for you."

Aileen sang the songs of Gaelbhan for them, and as she sang, conversation dropped to a whisper, then stopped. When she had sung for half an hour, the king beckoned a guard to him and whispered, "Bring me Trapper Hawkins, and the furrier also."

Aileen sang late into the night, and when she finished, a guard escorted the trapper into the hall. "He was roaring drunk, Your Highness. We tried to sober him, but ..." The guard shrugged and Batair motioned him to stand aside. He pointed to Gaelbhan's skin. "Trapper Hawkins. Tell me how you came by this pelt."

The trapper bowed. "Gladly, Your Highness. I was checking my trap line when I came to a set that had a badger in it. But that thing had killed my badger and was chewing on it raw. When I saw its fur gleam in the sunlight, I knew I had to get it for you, my princess." He bowed to Ciarda.

"As I approached the monster, it snarled at me, and tore that badger carcass in two just like you'd tear a leg off a roasted chicken. Then it snarled and sprang at me, teeth —"

"Did he speak to you?" Batair interrupted.

"Speak? Your Highness, this was a

Artwork by Jonathan & Lisa Hunt

beast. A dumb brute. It could only grunt and growl."

"How big was he?"

"Taller than me, with muscles like a bear."

"And how did you kill it?"

"After a long and dangerous fight I split its skull with my hatchet. Even as it died it tried to rip me with its claws and teeth."

Batair motioned him to silence and looked toward the furrier. "What do you think of his tale?"

"A fur may shrink when it's prepared, but even so, that creature stood no more than four feet tall, and had no bulging muscles under its skin."

"Pardon me," Hawkins said. "It may have seemed bigger in the heat of the fight. But no matter the size, it was strong and vicious."

Batair scowled the trapper into silence. "Furrier, can you tell me how the creature died?"

"The scalp wasn't split, but I found some bruising about the neck. I'd say it was strangled."

Batair glared at the trapper. "Well?"

Hawkins shrugged, and tried to smile. "But that fur was so valuable, so beautiful."

"Be thankful that vengeance was not Gaelbhan's way. You are going to give the money I paid for this pelt to the poor of The Landing, every copper of it."

"But Your Highness, I've already spent a lot of it."

"Then you will work until you pay it back." Batair snatched Gaelbhan's hide from his daughter's shoulders, and held it up for all his guests to see. "I would never have bought this if I had known who Gaelbhan was. And woe to the next hunter that brings a Spook fur to The Landing."

Batair dismissed his guests and gave Aileen the purse she had earned. The minstrel raised her eyebrows as she felt its weight. "Thank you, Your Highness. Your generosity —"

"That's for what you've done and for what you will do. Take Gaelbhan's pelt and bury it with him."

"No," Ciarda said, grabbing the fur and wrapping it about her. "I'll never get another stole like this. What good will it do to bury it? We can never bring Gaelbhan back."

"If you wish to rule someday," Batair said, "you must learn now what it is to be a queen."

She slowly pulled the fur from her shoulders, and turning her back to Batair, handed the stole to Aileen. "Some day I will be queen," she whispered, and Aileen saw what Batair could not see: defiance in her eyes. When Batair passed on, she would have her Spook's fur again. Wolvor's magic had not worked.

Later Aileen found a few mouse-gnawed bones in Gaelbhan's glade, all that remained of the Sunelf, except for his songs. She laid the pelt among the bones, then hiked farther on to warn the Sunelves on the mountain. "Your potion didn't kill her desire," he told Wolvor.

"Too soon. It takes weeks for it to do its job, and it doesn't work by killing desire."

"But when she becomes queen, she'll send hunters out again for your pelts."

"You can't get rid of a hole by digging it deeper."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You get rid of a hole by filling it. You get rid of a desire by fulfilling it. Our people will be safe. Trust me."

"I will," Aileen said. What else could she do?

Now Aileen let her emotions go and she wandered for a month through the small towns and villages of the upland valleys to sing out her grief for the loss of Gaelbhan. Then she returned to The Landing and asked an audience of Batair to tell him she had done what the king had asked.

"I only wish you had taken the hide away sooner," Batair said. "Did you know how dangerous it was?"

"It came from a gentle creature. What danger?"

"Ciarda will never ride through the streets of the Landing again. Come and see." Aileen followed Batair through a maze of halls to a remote part of the palace, where the king rapped on a solid oak door.

"Who's there?" Aileen recognized Ciarda's voice.

"Your father."

"Come in, then."

As Aileen followed Batair into the room, she saw Ciarda standing before her, wearing a simple dress that left her arms bare. On those arms, and on her neck, head, and even on her face, grew a gleaming coat of silver fur.

❄

Lynn David Hebert grew up in a small town in the Green Mountains of Vermont, where his favorite pursuits were roaming the fields and woods and reading classic books from the town library. At St. Michael's College, he majored in Philosophy, and minored in the Classics and Science. After college he did a tour in the Navy, worked in a factory, taught English as a Second Language, then settled into science teaching and earned a doctorate in Science Education from SUNY at Buffalo. Lynn now teaches science and computers at several local colleges and schools in the green mountains, and tutors at a ski school. When not teaching or writing, he spends as much time as he can in the outdoors: hiking, camping, fishing, biking, and XC-skiing. His other interests include gardening, folk music, and languages.

Jonathan & Lisa Hunt are professional illustrators and writers living in Florida. Their children's books are published by Simon & Schuster. The Hunts have also contributed illustrations to such diverse publications as *Asimov's*, *Analog*, *Cricket*, *Haunts*, and Llewellyn. They regularly participate in East Coast sf/f conventions.

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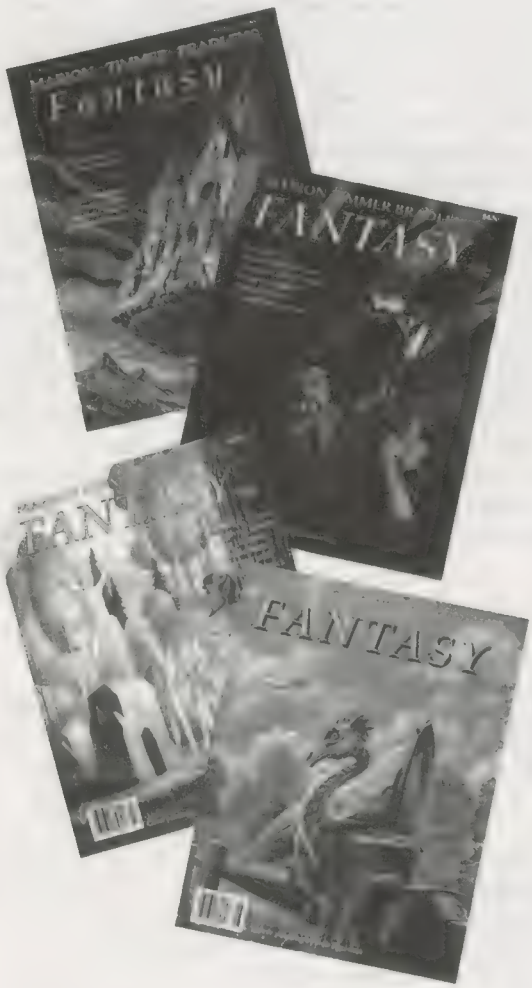

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THE LAST WORD

We have some nice stories lined up for the next several issues. Darrell Schweitzer sent us a really magical story called "The Invisible Knight's Squire", and Michael Kucharski has turned in a brilliant sketch for the cover for it. Vincent Di Fate is doing a dragon painting which will probably be displayed on the cover of issue 50. Mark Ferarri decided to take a chance on working with me (he's had bad experiences with other art directors, so I'm really pleased that we seem to get on well) and so he'll illustrate the cover of our very next issue, which features a Susan Dexter story. I have hopes of hiring Leo and Diane Dillon for a cover sometime.

Other treats are in store as well: stories from Laura Underwood, Patricia Russo; artwork by Alicia Austin, Margaret Organ-Kean (who has just done some lovely color illustrations for a children's book, **PETRONELLA**, being reissued by a new press called Moon Mountain Books), and George Barr.

Future interview subjects might be Harry Turtledove, Sharon Shinn, Pamela Dean, Patricia Wrede, Elizabeth Willey, Megan Lindholm/Robin Hobb, Alan Garner, John Wyndham, R.A. MacAvoy, John Crowley, Tad Williams, or Peter Dickinson. If you have suggestions, email me at reh@well.com.

As far as this issue goes, I love the Cherith Baldry story and Lori Deitrick's gentle illustrations (while I have never played harp, I am a musician and singer), and I'm very pleased to be able to print a story by Elizabeth Wein, whose novel about Mordred, **WINTER PRINCE**, really impressed me. Elizabeth has that knack, similar to such greats as Ursula K. Le Guin, of conveying a rich picture in just a few well-chosen words. Omar Rayyan's thoughtful drawings added to the story, too.

I was delighted by Lynne Fahnestalk's depiction of Katherine Woodbury's fax machine which was really an evil witch (everyone knows an office which has one of these, though mercifully the MZB office fax is quite well-behaved). Both vegetarians and carnivores would enjoy "Cauliflower", I thought. Lyn McConchie's "Faer Trading" and Peg Robinson's "Just Rule" were more "down" than we usually print, but their characters seemed vivid and alive, and acted in ways true to their situations. Our final story this issue had elves in it, something you have rarely seen in these pages. All too often, the stories submitted to us with elves or dwarves are just not interesting enough to print, and the nonhuman characters seem to be there just for window-dressing. If the character could just as well be human, why have it be anything else? A story's characters and plot must interact, and each detail must count for something. Otherwise you waste the reader's time, or fall into the trap which Marion referred to as "too much good writing".

Which somehow brings to mind some books I'd like to recommend: George R.R. Martin's **GAME OF THRONES** and **CLASH OF KINGS**. My only regret is that now I must wait several more years until the next book in this engaging fantasy series comes out, so that I can find out what is happening to its characters. And if you like mysteries at all, both Ann Sharp (Marion's trustee) and I can suggest the "Amelia Peabody" mysteries by Elizabeth Peters.

Be sure to fill out your Cauldron ballot and mail it, perhaps even with some additional comments attached. The staff (and the writers and the artists) always enjoys receiving feedback.

— Rachel E. Holmen

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STORY

- ❑ **Untune the Sky** by Cherith Baldry
- ❑ **Valemist Tower** by Patricia Novak
- ❑ **The Janitor's Closet** by Katherine Woodbury
- ❑ **Cauliflower** by Annette Hall
- ❑ **A Dear Gazelle** by Elizabeth Wein
- ❑ **Faer Trading** by Lyn McConchie
- ❑ **Just Rule** by Peg Robinson
- ❑ **The Skin Trade** by Lynn Hebert

ARTIST

- ❑ Lori Deitrick
- ❑ K. L. Darnell
- ❑ Lynne Fahnestalk
- ❑ Margaret Davis
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- ❑ Heather Hudson
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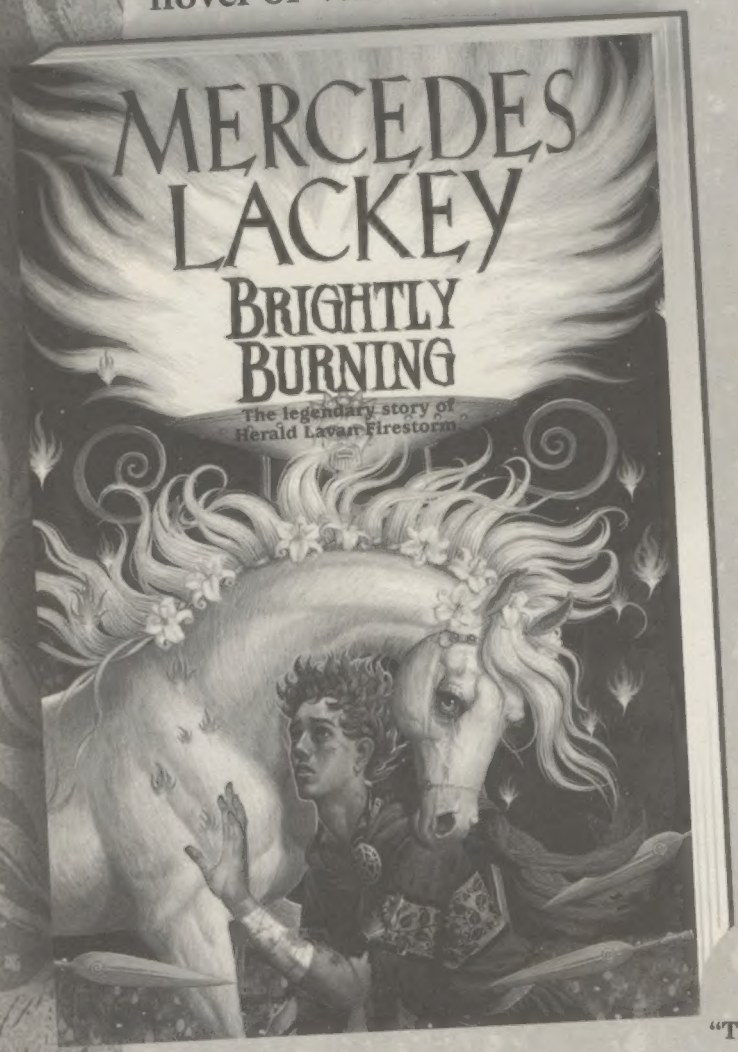

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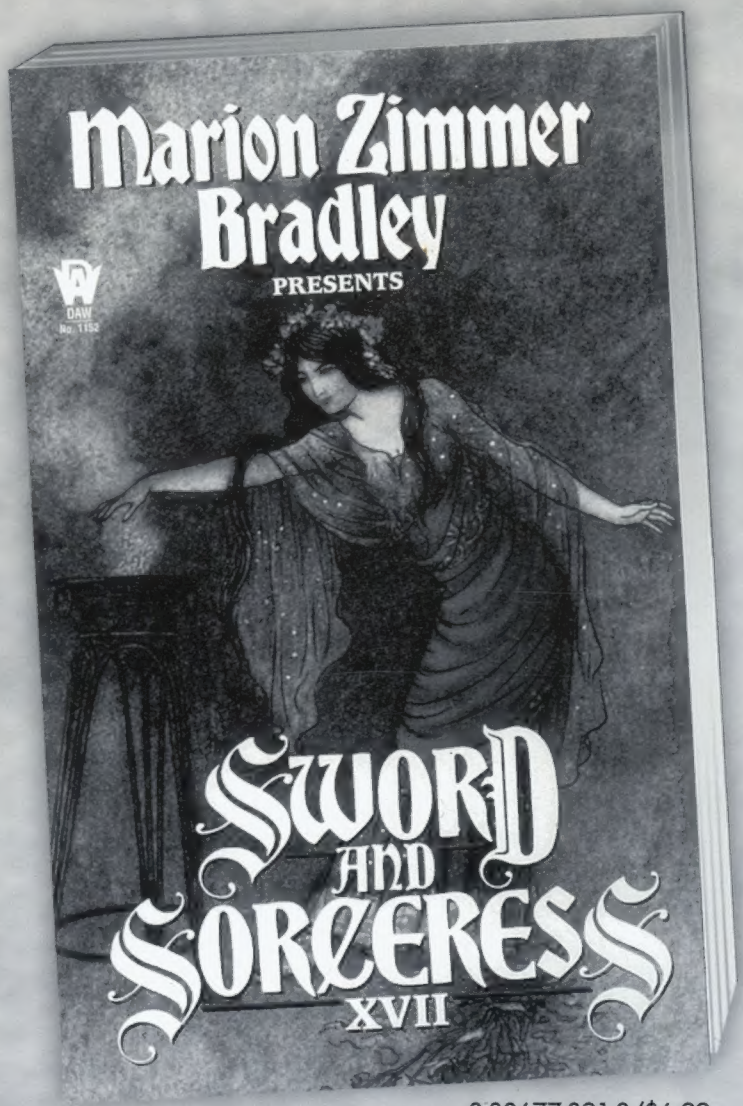

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